

DAUGHTERS OF DESPERATION



HILDEGARD BROOKS

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**The Daughters of
Desperation**

Author of
The Master of Caxton
Without a Warrant





“I heard voices beyond a bosket of evergreen.”

Daughters of Desperation

By

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The Daughters of
Desperation

Chapter One

THE dog, I protest, was none of mine. He joined me in Keswick's streets, somewhere between the station and my friend's house. Had the day not been too hot for extra exertion, and had I not been hampered by my dress-suit case, I should have taken pains to rid myself of his company; for, to describe him fairly, he was small, mean, and disreputable in appearance—the sorriest cur that ever mortified a man by trotting along at his heels with the air of belonging to him.

To arrive at the house in my dignity of groomsman with this ridiculous accompaniment was to invite a chaffing. I affected to ignore the little beast (dogs are usually so alive to slights); but this one stuck by me till he had plunged me into my adventure.

The streets of Keswick radiate from circular parks, and unless one is alert it is difficult

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to keep an unswerving course through the town. At Auburn Circle I struck into the wrong street, and a few blocks farther on I saw by the sun that I was walking in quite the wrong direction. To regain Dewey Avenue I tried to cut across by a sort of back alley where the sun blazed mercilessly hot. On either side were sequestered gardens quite hid from my view by the high hot brick walls along which I passed—hid, except for their trees and higher shrubs. There was a provoking certainty of coolness and shade and rest within while I strode along in the fiercely bright and dusty alley. When I came to a low wooden door and heard, close behind it, the sound of falling water I realised that I was consumed with thirst. I paused and tried the handle of the door.

It was locked. I was for passing on; but that small dog—surely the devil was in him—must jump officiously against the panels and give them a vigorous scratching.

Inside a bolt was promptly shot back and the door opened. I looked into a dim in-



Charlotte M. Jones 1911.

“I was consumed with thirst.”



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terior, a sort of spacious tool-house. Through it I saw the green shrubbery of a garden and, close by, my fountain.

The man who had opened the door was big and stolid, with a face I should not remember a moment. He was clad in a sort of servant's livery.

"Pardon me," said I. "May I take a drink of water at your fountain?"

"Come in, sir," he returned in a low tone that surprised me. When I stepped in he closed the door and bolted it; and to my complete amazement he continued mysteriously: "The signal was all right. No further precautions are necessary. This is the place: and they're waiting for you in the garden."

I have never liked to keep people waiting, and without more words with the door-keeper, who did not strike me as looking in any way interesting, I passed on.

In the garden all was growing wild and luxuriant in long neglect. Vines had taken possession of trees, the grass stood tall and full of early summer flowers. Between the

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trees I caught sight of a large and rather sombre house, close-shuttered in its upper stories, though its piazza doors were open. Further assurance that the place was inhabited were the voices I heard beyond a bosket of evergreens.

In another moment I entered a shady place, greenly enclosed, where I found three young women seated behind a rustic table. At sight of me they started up; and I took in, at first glance, their most apparent traits.

One was blond, and straight and slender, correctly and severely dressed in a white duck costume with a faultlessly folded cravat. Another was short and lithe, of dark and brilliant colouring, dressed airily and elegantly in light summer fabric. The third appeared younger, slighter, simpler than the other two. Her face was like a child's in the delicacy of its colouring, but pathetically cast into the mould of suffering. All three looked toward me with such grave and eager expectancy that I felt a shock of uneasiness.

"Ladies," said I, as I removed my hat and

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drew near, "I asked the man at the garden door for a drink of water. He told me that my signal was correct, that no further precautions were necessary, and that you were awaiting me here in the garden."

I thought I was thus neatly prepared either to step farther into the adventure, as opportunity presented itself; or else, if I should be regarded as an intruder, to throw all the blame where it belonged—on the man at the door.

The blond young lady in white answered me. Her voice was singularly low and cool.

"Quite right, Mr. Gardiner," she said. "No further precautions are necessary. The scratching on the door was the signal agreed upon. We have arranged everything for secrecy, and you are as safe here as with Mr. Stepnovo."

The name she called me by threw a blinding light on my situation. Gardiner—that was the notorious burglar who had but a day or two before escaped from the State penitentiary.

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I found myself bowing formally, introduced as Gardiner to Miss Dicey (she was the dark-eyed young lady), to Miss Houghton (her of the child-like, pathetic mien), and to Miss Halliburton (the low-voiced blonde, the leader). The latter continued her explanations:

"These are Miss Dicey's house and grounds. We have been here all this week, with Powell, whom you saw at the door, making all the preparations for to-night's work. The Bushnells, where we break in, is the adjoining place. I suppose you have with you in your bag"—she indicated my dress-suit case—"all the tools you need for opening the safe?"

"I have with me all that I need, I hope, to bring this affair to its proper conclusion," I returned, as I looked over these strange young persons with ill-concealed consternation. "But do I really understand you? Do *you* mean to break into the house and open the safe?"

"You are assured of our assistance," cried

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Miss Houghton, with simple fervour. "We are proud to be trusted."

"I'm afraid we aren't trusted, if I judge by Mr. Gardiner's expression," said Miss Dicey, quickly.

"To be frank," I said, holding her eyes with a grave look, "I am quite unprepared to find you ladies even willing to undertake it—and I can't pretend that the idea pleases me."

My speech evidently surprised them. Miss Houghton and Miss Dicey, at least, looked frankly startled. Their leader maintained her almost stony calm.

"Mr. Stepnovo has not had time to tell you much of our plan, I suppose?" she asked me, quietly.

I affirmed boldly that I relied on her to enlighten me. At any cost I was determined to garner this windfall of experience. They invited me to be seated with them—they poured me a glass of iced tea; and now we were all about the rustic table, and I listened with ever-growing amazement while Miss Halliburton laid bare what was proposed.

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"It is easy to see why a man of your skill would rather work alone," she said. "But opening the safe is only a part of the work. There's more silver than one man can handle alone. We have decided that Powell is too clumsy to be trusted in the Bushnell's basement; so we ourselves shall help you get the hampers out, at least as far as the area door. Then you and Powell can bring them over here to Miss Dicey's stable, to pack them for shipment. There again we shall have to help. There are more than a thousand pieces of silver. As Miss Bushnell's bridesmaids, we have had a chance to see all her presents."

Bridesmaids were they? I was aghast. And to the bride of Fred Spoffard—whom I was to serve that day as groomsman?

"I see you are horrified," put in Miss Houghton, "at this sad waste of substance—this vain display in the way of wedding silver."

"I—am horrified!" I admitted.

"But you should rather rejoice!" she cried, with enthusiasm, "for the greater the folly has

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been, the greater shall be our wisdom. The more they have spent in their idle and pompous luxury, the more we shall to-night turn back into its true channel of usefulness."

"What channel?" I demanded.

She looked surprised.

"Is it possible that you have been living with Stepnovo twenty-four hours and have not been won over to the cause?" she said.

"I can't say that I have seen anything of Stepnovo," I returned, uneasily.

"Of course! Stepnovo has no time now to make converts," said Miss Dicey. "He must be writing furiously day and night, and printing the *Hammer* besides. There will be plenty of time to enlighten Mr. Gardiner when this piece of work is done."

"Yes, we must attend to the matter in hand," said Miss Halliburton, and she continued to me, "As I say, there is more silver than one man can handle, even though we don't mean to take it all."

"Why not take it all?" I asked, hoping for a little light from this side.

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"Because there are a few pieces with which Miss Bushnell can justly claim to have some association of sentiment," returned Miss Haliburton. "We should not feel justified in taking these."

"But you do feel justified in making a clean haul of all the rest?" I asked, incredulously.

"Really, Mr. Gardiner, when I remember the principles you professed in your letter," she began, with a still further freezing of her manner and a very suspicious look out of her dark-grey eyes.

"Oh, *I* should have no compunctions," I interrupted her, hastily; for I realised that unless I was Gardiner to these interesting young persons I was nobody at all, and had no business in their midst. "I should be incapable of your nice distinctions. I shouldn't know, as you do, what I had a right to take and what it would be more delicate to leave behind. I'm only trying to find a way by which it will be unnecessary for you ladies to—ah—oh—steal any of the silver. Don't you think there is a great probability that the Bushnells

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will have a watchman, with this enormous value of things in the house?"

"I've asked Miss Bushnell all about that," Miss Dicey answered me, readily. "She says the safe is so strong there's not the least danger of its being opened. It really is a new and very hard kind of safe, Mr. Gardiner; but we rely on your phenomenal skill."

"The opening of it doesn't worry me at all," I returned, with the confident air I supposed a Gardiner would assume. "The conditions all seem favourable. I feel sure the silver can be ours to-night."

"Not ours, Mr. Gardiner; it is dedicated to the Cause," Miss Houghton reproved me. "We have understood that you work as we do, without thought of remuneration."

"Beyond my travelling expenses," I returned, "I expect nothing. But, to speak with candour, I care very little for the cause. I exercise my art rather for the love of it—for the excitement and for the danger."

I thought I caught a gleam of sympathy from Miss Dicey's eyes; but she quickly low-

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ered them, and a higher colour flooded her smooth brow. I was disappointed in my hope that my speech would call forth a little elucidation of what the "Cause" might be. Miss Dicey looked down, Miss Houghton seemed disappointed in me, Miss Halliburton gave me a cold glance of disapprobation.

"And for this reason," I continued, looking at them in turn, "I am not in the least enthusiastic over your taking part. To me the theft of so much silver has not the glamour that it wears to you. I know, by experience, the little accidents that may happen to one's nerve at the crucial moment. I am afraid that you ladies could hardly escape them. Remember that you are to have none of the relish and stimulation with which I shall conquer the unknown intricacies of the lock, bringing my keenest powers to play."

It occurred to me that I was making a better Gardiner than the man himself. Certainly my hearers were impressed, and I continued, gravely: "It will be your part to stand idle till it comes to the ugly and disreputable task

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of laying hands on another's property and bearing it away tip-toe. If there is any sickening of the spirit then, any disgust at the sneaking silence of the work, that shall cause trembling hands and bungling fingers and uncertain steps—if there is one stumble, one object dropped to clang on the area floor—there is our ruin !”

About us lay the hushed stillness of the summer noon. A soft breath of roses hinted of the garden's wealth ; but I was mindful of the earnest looks and graceful attitudes of attention in my three auditors. Miss Houghton had her elbows on the table, supporting her face like a grave, listening child. Miss Dicey was leaning toward me with a frank and animated interest, and Miss Halliburton kept her grey eyes fixed on me with a minute attention.

I could not but be gratified ; and, to do myself justice, I was speaking effectively, settling back in my chair, and not denying myself an occasional dignified gesture.

“I am so much older than you, and have

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had so much more experience in crime," I continued (having made a rapid mental review of all that I had heard about the famous burglar), "that I feel I am truly called to warn you. As you doubtless know, I was raised in a respectable home and received the technical education befitting the bent of my mind. It is also well known that before I fell into my present line I was a mechanic of good reputation, getting large fees for opening safes that had been closed by accident, or to which the combinations had been mislaid. I had a comfortable living, and temptation arose rather from within than from without. I am a burglar rather from taste than from necessity. Still, I don't see my vocation in a false light. I am carried away by its fascination, but not blinded to its disadvantages. To my calmer judgment, the honest life is to be recommended above the dishonest; and my recent experience in the penitentiary was not calculated to increase my infatuation with the career of a thief. I therefore assure you, ladies, I would gladly lay my fame aside if I could be a re-

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spectable groomsman, to-day, at the wedding where you are to be bridesmaids. It is out of the question for me to reform. My habits are fixed; but I assume that you ladies have never yet departed from the paths of conventional good behaviour. I confess I don't like to add to my own past crimes the responsibility of coaching you in your first. If, therefore, there is any way in which Mr. Stepново's business can be left in my hands alone, I should be gratified. If there is not"—I paused, looked from face to face and then spoke roundly—"I am inclined to withdraw from the undertaking altogether."

They were silent, dismayed—more, they were indignant. Miss Dicey flashed reproach at me, Miss Houghton's lips parted as if she would visit her wrath upon me in words; but both contained themselves and looked to their comrade to answer me; and she, for the moment, seemed to have lost her fine composure and failed for lack of words. A delicate shell-pink had spread over her face, her eyes darkened mysteriously as she looked at me, and

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there appeared a tiny fold on her smooth forehead.

"The silver is pledged," she said, with an effort. "You know that, Mr. Gardiner—and you know what we all risk. We cannot let you off from your promise——"

She regained her self-control as she spoke, and her tone was grown icy.

"Of course you can force us to regard your absurd scruple," she said. "If you refuse to let us help, we are forced to remain aloof to-night, at whatever added risk to our success."

Miss Dicey and Miss Houghton showed in their faces how little this pleased them, but evidently Miss Halliburton's decision was valid. There was no open demur. Their leader continued to address me, and now in the level tones of her low voice there was here and there a wavering.

"You have greatly disappointed us, Mr. Gardiner. We thought you too regarded society as your enemy. We thought Mr. Stepnovo had made clear to you the sense of our organisation——"

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"He did not," I said, with some eagerness.

"Let me assure you, then," she returned, steadily, "that the Daughters of Desperation are not a school of theory, but of practical endeavour. We mean *always* to act first and think afterward; and in this case we have already nearly completed the burglary in our preparations. Whether we personally enter the house to-night or not, we shall fully share the act with you."

"Nothing can take that satisfaction from us!" cried Miss Houghton.

I was still gazing at the leader whose face had grown stony cold once more. In her moment of excitement Miss Halliburton had been singularly handsome. The hint of feeling held in check had allured and teased my fancy, and the name of her organisation lay on me like a spell.

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THE next moment that happened which I might certainly have foreseen.

Powell and another man came suddenly upon us from the shrubbery; I was colared, dragged from the chair, thrown, bound, and presently gagged, all in less than a minute. There I lay like a log in the grass, and I heard Powell explain to the affrighted girls, while the other fellow held me, how that I was an impostor, not Gardiner at all, not even a common burglar, probably little better than an honest man on a private detective enterprise.

Then the man who hung over me gave certain proof that he was himself the only original Gardiner—so that my game was fairly up.

After the young ladies had rallied from their first consternation all agreed together that I must be questioned. I was required to promise by signs to make no outcry, and when



“I was bound and gagged—all in less than a minute.”



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I had done that I was lifted to a chair and the gag was removed.

I gave my name, business, native place, and errand in Keswick. It seemed to disturb my fair captors very little to learn that I was to be groomsman at the wedding where they were to be bridesmaids. Whatever their faults, self-consciousness, it seemed, was not among them. Neither did they appear to concern themselves with the audacity of the deception I had practised. Their minds were solely bent upon the exigencies of the situation. Here was an outsider in possession of their secret. What was to be done with him? They gave the matter minute and impersonal consideration.

Miss Dicey, who was the quick-witted chief-inquisitor, probed me delicately upon my intentions in regard to them. I assured her that I was one who took his civic duties seriously; that I had walked into their complot with the single purpose of exposing them; that if they persisted in their criminal intention I should deliver them all over to the police.

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"On the other hand, if you will agree to give up your enterprise altogether I shall be silent," I concluded, "and consider all that I have heard no affair of my own."

"It is not your affair, anyhow!" cried Miss Houghton, with some indignation.

"Pardon me, I am even personally interested," I returned. "The lady you propose to rob is the bride of my nearest friend, Fred Spoffard. I am to-day to be his groomsman; and for that reason, if for no other, I should feel bound to serve the lady's interest."

I meant the reproof should go home. Indeed, Miss Dicey bit her red lips, Miss Halliburton curled hers with a faint disdain, while Miss Houghton flushed up and spoke her mind.

"You mean to reproach us because we are Ina Bushnell's bridesmaids?" she demanded.

"Who am I to reproach you?" I asked.

"Who are you, indeed?" she returned, with every shade of scorn. "A defender of the system of grinding monopolies, of unearned

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increment—a supporter of the rich against the poor!”

“A supporter of my country’s laws!” I cried, in a noble tone of voice. I could not make a correspondingly noble gesture with Powell crouched almost on my back.

“Mr. Silsbee, you speak as you have been taught,” put in Miss Halliburton, with a low gravity of tone. “You have never yet thought for yourself. You have never considered how you live—and on what you live—and about those who hourly go under that you may live.”

“I know,” I returned rather seriously, “that I have advantages over other people, the contemplation of which does not increase my self-respect. If I had the choice I should play a more heroic part, but each must make the best of what is assigned him. I am bound to practise the prosy virtues of my class. I was unfortunately born and reared a gentleman——”

Here Gardiner interrupted me, contemptuously.

“You were born a squalling baby, like the

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rest of us. We are all alike till they dress us, some in rags and some in frills. You were reared to know which side your bread was buttered. You were taught to expect an unfailing supply of jam. Your virtues came as a matter of course. If you've respected the so-called property of other people it's because you've never needed it. If you've never stolen it's because you have never been hungry. Don't talk to us about the virtues of your class!"

Now Gardiner was pretty fat, quite as if he knew very little himself about hunger. It was provoking to see the three girls listen to his foolishness as to the words of a prophet.

"Sir, you almost convince me," I said to him, sarcastically. "Your trenchant eloquence almost moves me to join your warfare against society, and to rob, pillage, burn, and kill for some such noble cause as your own. But I am unfit for the glorious martyrdom of the penitentiary with which *you* are so appropriately crowned. I should be unworthy of the gallows which *you* would most certainly grace."

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Gardiner's face darkened. He withdrew with the three young women to a long, low consultation, during which they frequently glanced back to me. The three charming figures against the screen of dark hemlock, the well-dressed, commonplace-looking man who stood before them, all made a picture innocent enough. I watched the enemy, almost forgetting they were such, though Powell still devoted himself heavily to the task of holding me down.

Presently something was proposed at which the ladies started. Then Miss Dicey left the group and hurried toward me.

"Mr. Silsbee, when just now you were pretending to be Gardiner you spoke with a real insight into a burglar's soul-life," she said, with her pretty and sincere air of vivacity. "I feel sure you can't be as stupid as most well-behaved people. You have really remarkable talents." (Such unblushing blandishment, such cunning cajolery as her manner conveyed I have never before met in woman.) "Could you not consider joining us? Believe

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me, there is something to live for when every step is on the edge of quicksands; and if you could once taste the madness of adventure you would sicken at the thought of returning to a respectable and police-protected life."

"Miss Circe," I replied, smiling at her—"pardon me, Miss *Dicey*—what would you turn me into?"

She looked considerably taken aback, and withdrew as in relief when Miss Halliburton slowly approached.

"Mr. Silsbee, we have a proposition to make you," she said. "You are aware that you have greatly embarrassed us——"

"I hope not," I said, ironically.

"You doubtless think you have frustrated our plans," she continued, calmly, "but you are mistaken. We shall do our work and disappear, and it will be a thankless search for us among the obscure millions of a great city. But even if we are found, I ask you to consider what a wearisome long piece of business for you to appear in all our trials as the sole witness. You surely like peace and quiet. Sup-

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pose you go your way now and forget all that you have heard and seen?"

"I don't shun trouble," I answered her, sincerely. "I would put myself out very greatly to be of service to ladies; and to prevent yourself and your two friends from entering upon this headlong course toward ruin would, I hope, be a real service."

"Let me speak to him," cried Miss Houghton, coming up in her turn. Miss Halliburton stepped aside, and the third appeal was flung at me by Miss Houghton.

"I only ask you to consider," she urged, with fiery vehemence, "that we constantly discover that we have been acting on principles wrongly or insufficiently based, do we not? Isn't every moral ideal merely relative? Must it not give proof of life by constant growth and expansion? Suppose that we agree that it would be wrong for you to steal. Does it necessarily follow that the act would be wrong in *us*?"

"Great is circumstance," I returned, "but I can't conceive of any that would——"

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She interrupted me in her heat :

“Now Ina Bushnell,” she said, “hasn’t a serious thought in life !”

I was for protesting ; her declaration seemed to reflect upon Fred Spoffard. Miss Houghton would not let me come to words, but continued, warmly :

“We know her intimately. She has lived with us in one apartment, and Miss Dicey and she, as you see, have been near neighbours from childhood. Nobody can know her and judge her better than we. She is extravagant ; she cares not a straw about the poor. She openly rejoices in her unearned increment ; buying chocolates and matinee tickets with it, offering to treat us to these, instead of responding to our wish that she would support the Cause. We three give all our strength and time and money to the great work, and she isn’t even taxed ; yet it is she who will profit by our endeavours, through her descendants. Now we propose to take by force from her the mere lumber of her life, which she is simply too stupid to give voluntarily. We mean to

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take from her greedy and overburdened wealth the surplus it can easiest spare. We mean to take these costly articles which nobody really wants—nobody wanted to give them, nobody needed to receive them, nobody can truly miss them—and we mean to turn them into money for the highest use. To-day they represent vanity, ostentation, grudging payment of imagined debts. To-morrow they will be already converted into the bone and sinew of the young giant, Social Regeneration. Consider it! All we want to do with Ina Bushnell's so-called property is to invest it securely for her. It is she who will gain the most."

"On this ground," I returned, "I might consider joining you. But I have never met Miss Bushnell. I don't feel justified in such an act of intimate friendship as to help her to invest her personal property."

Even Miss Houghton now gave me up. With evident distress they once more all consulted together. This time they quickly came to an agreement.

"As you won't compromise on any terms,

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we must detain you as our prisoner, Mr. Silsbee," said Miss Halliburton. "You are in the hands of desperate people. I suggest that you let yourself be led to the house without making any resistance."

"I don't mind in the least being forcibly detained," I answered. "It relieves me from any sense of responsibility. I'm afraid Mr. Spoffard will be a little inconvenienced if his groomsmen doesn't turn up."

"We shall telegraph Mr. Spoffard," she reassured me, quietly.

Gardiner had taken Powell's place in gripping me, and Miss Dicey had given a few brief directions to Powell. He departed for the house on a run. I guessed that it was to prepare a dungeon for me. There was a pause while we waited for his return, and during it I had a happy little thought of revenge.

"Ladies, though I suffer by your decision, I see its beautiful necessity," I said, amiably. "I want to thank you for offering me escape on generous terms before you decided to constrain me. May I leave with you a little gift,

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a slight token of my appreciation? It has a value which you may not altogether despise. Ladies, do you notice the small dog with sparse auburn hair who sniffs delicately about among those lilacs? He is mine, and I treasure him. He is a thorough-bred Manchurian terrier whose parents were presented by a mandarin of high rank to my uncle, Commander Pivot of the U. S. Navy. This dog, ladies, combines Oriental astuteness with Western culture. His weight in gold would not buy him; but I want to present him to you. I want to dedicate him to your cause—which I am unworthy to serve myself—in the hope that he may be to you in the future what he has been to me in the past. Will you accept the dear little fellow, ladies, in the name of your association?"

They looked between lively interest and a mild dismay at the ugly little brute. Miss Dicey fell upon a knee, and with soft whistling and snapping of the fingers called the dog. He trotted up, and with insolent calm climbed upon her exquisite gown.

"How odd! How quaint! How lovely!"

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they cried in turn, growing warmer as they stroked him.

"How knowing and Chinese he looks!" exclaimed Miss Dicey. "What is his name, Mr. Silsbee?"

"His name," I returned, with my glee concealed, "in the Manchurian dialect is He-za-si-to; but it is often Anglicised into He's-a-sight-oh!"

The girls laughed. I maintained my gravity.

"But I've given him a more friendly name. I have attached him to myself by the familiar sound of—ah—*Josh*. I chose Josh as being truly Chinese, and at the same time homely, rural, kindly."

Here Powell returned, and, laying hands on me, demanded permission to lead me to the prison he had prepared. The young ladies granted it a little reluctantly. Between the two men I was hurried toward the house, leaving the ladies to whatever fate that unhallowed cur of the gutters might bring down upon them.

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My prison was a cellar-vault furnished with a few casks and boxes, as I saw by the light of the lantern Powell had placed there. Here the men unbound me, assured me that the house above was unoccupied, and invited me to make what outcry I pleased. As they had considerably brought along my dress-suit case from the garden, and as they left me the lantern when they went away, I was able to view my situation with philosophic cheerfulness. I had cigars with me and a yet unread volume of Mr. Wister's short stories, and I thought I could pass my durance in fair comfort. Even while my gaolers bolted the heavy door outside I was pulling forward one box for a table and a lower one for a seat.

It seemed to me that my interesting experience of the noon hours was not a bad exchange for the harassing duty I had escaped—that of getting Fred Spoffard, clothed and in his right mind, to the appointed spot in time for his own wedding.

In alternate reading and meditation the hours wore away.

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BUT a book, some cigars, and the oil of one lantern will be spent at last. When one has not lunched, moreover, dinner becomes a matter of importance. As my own hour for dining drew near and passed without my getting sign from the outer world, my thoughts grew less optimistic. The lantern burned low. I was forced to put it out and sit in the dark. After that even the entertainment of reviewing my adventure waxed less. I began seriously to blame the parents of these three young women for the laxity of their moral training.

From time to time I lit a match and consulted my watch. This proved a very poor amusement. I remembered with regret how I had reproached my small nephew for not taking with manly calm the punishment of staying in a corner for five minutes; and, with a burst of sympathy, I remembered his sobbed reply:



“Stand !” thundered Powell, “or
I shoot !”



Chapter Three

"Five minutes is longer than anybody thinks!"

It is longer, I solemnly affirm. And seven or eight hours is longer than anybody had ever dreamed.

However, I pass it over. It was about nine o'clock in the evening when I heard footsteps at last, and saw light under my door. There was a whispered conversation. Something heavy was set down on the floor. Then the door was unbolted, opened, and the light of a dark-lantern flashed upon me.

"I have covered you with my revolver," came Powell's voice, warningly.

"Thanks," I returned. "I wasn't cold."

There was a light giggle out of the darkness, and then came the voice of one of my fair captors:

"I've brought you your supper, Mr. Silsbee."

"You could have brought me nothing I wanted more!" I exclaimed, gratefully, and I rose and advanced.

"Stand!" thundered Powell, "or I shoot!"

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"No, don't stand, Mr. Silsbee," said the young lady, "but rather come and help me with this basket. I am sure you will attempt no violence, since I come upon this errand of mercy."

"Thank you for reading my nature aright," said I; and now Powell turned the beams of his lantern, and I recognised Miss Dicey. She was dressed in a wonderful light-blue gown, of which she had caught up the frills and ruffles from the cellar floor, so that on her high-heeled white slippers she seemed to be rising tip-toe through a cloud; and she bent with the weight of the basket she carried. I hastened to take it from her.

"You have provided me," I observed, "as though I had starved a week instead of only a day."

"The bulk of it is decorations," she returned. "I thought it was a pity you should miss all the festivity of the wedding. I shall set the table for you nicely, and you can pretend you were at the supper over there."

I watched with entire approval as she spread

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my box with white cloth, placed two candles and lit them, and then set forth the cates, each in itself an attractive decoration.

"Sit down and fall to," she invited me, cordially. "You must be ravenous. You will like these lobster croquettes to begin with; and those patties are something delicious beyond expression. And here are both champagne and Apollinaris water. I *knew* you'd be thirsty. Right in the middle of the ceremony this evening I thought of it, and I whispered to Miss Houghton and Miss Halliburton: 'Do you suppose he's thirsty?' And, would you believe it, they thought I meant Mr. Spoffard! His voice was rather husky, you know, and he has *such* a name for cock-tails!"

I still stood absorbed in the charm of the scene. Miss Dicey made a picture in those strange surroundings.

"Ah, the stem of this champagne glass is broken!" she exclaimed, with regret. "I packed in such hurry. You must use the goblet."

She stood before me in the soft candle-light

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offering me the great glass of sparkling wine. Against the dark, damp walls of the cellar, and with that grim figure of the armed Powell behind her, the effect was quaint and brilliant.

"Give me the broken glass," said I; "and you take the goblet. Let us drink to the health of your cause!"

"You will?" she inquired, with a mocking little smile. "The cause to which you are sacrificed?" But she stood and clinked glasses with me and tasted the wine, and afterward was even persuaded to sit down opposite me and play at eating while she attentively saw to my wants.

I was truly hungry, and the dainties of the wedding-supper, liberally as they were provided, melted away before me. Yet I was not distracted from a fairly close observation of my hostess. Her high colour and the occasional ring to her voice spoke undeniably of stage-fright. If she had not brought the man with the gun along I should have felt bound by all that lay within my power to put her



“She stood before me offering me a glass of sparkling wine.”

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more at her ease. I should have shown myself a simple, grateful, harmless, hungry fellow, of small wit and with great respect for my superiors. But the presence of this revolvered guard, with his ruffianly dark-lantern, gave another tang to the situation. I rejoiced in my enemy's discomfiture, and spared her nothing in the way of level looks while we talked.

"Isn't it a charming idea to serve the cream in these paper slippers?" she chattered. "It has been such a pretty wedding. It is too bad you have missed it!"

"But I haven't missed the very prettiest part of it," said I.

"Yes, the supper is nice; but you ought to have seen——"

"You don't suppose I mean the supper!" I interrupted. She glowed and flashed a light defiance at me. Powell moved a little.

"There were twelve bridesmaids!" stated Miss Dicey, "and we decorated the whole lower floor of the house with ferns and roses. It was perfectly beautiful. There was only candle-light in the drawing-room where they

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received, and the bride was a perfect vision of loveliness."

"She must be very beautiful to dare to have twelve bridesmaids," I suggested. "Isn't the number unusually large?"

"It took every friend and cousin she had to fill out the number," declared Miss Dicey, "and she had to press into her service three of her—enemies."

I looked at Miss Dicey attentively a moment. Clearly she was challenging me to question her.

"Then the depredation you have planned to-night," I said, slowly, "is not, after all, purely in the interest of a high cause? You mean to spoil an enemy?"

"We are her enemies only in the name of our cause," Miss Dicey averred. "Personally, we are all fond of Ina Bushnell. It is only a few months ago since she lived with us in the city. We all had an apartment together, and she was studying art at the same school with me. But she grew gradually more and more antagonistic to our social theories till finally

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we had to put her out. She bears us no malice and we bear her none; we wage war against her much as we do against you."

"If you treat Miss Bushnell—or rather Mrs. Spoffard—as you have treated me I don't see what she can complain of," I observed.

"You are very good-humoured. Has the day had no discomfort?"

"The evening so much more than compensates me—" I murmured.

"I am not here solely for your entertainment," she said, a little slowly, and she looked at the floor. "In fact, I have come in the name of our association to parley with you, and I brought the supper rather by way of a peace-offering."

"I needed the supper," said I, "so I cannot say I am sorry you brought it. But it wounds me that you should think I needed to be appeased. It reflects on the kindliness of my disposition."

"Let us have no more pretence of amiability," she cried, with a sudden, nervous serious-

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ness. "But tell me quickly whether you have had enough of your imprisonment. Will you, if we now set you free, go your way and leave us alone? Are you ready now to make the promise you refused this morning?"

"I should like to have a quiet talk with you on that subject," I proposed, looking at the guard at the door.

"Powell, stand outside, will you?" said Miss Dicey to her man.

"No, ma'am," he returned, valiantly, "I won't!"

I liked the fellow's answer. It showed responsibility. At the same time Powell was the man who had collared me in the garden that morning, and, now that I had an excuse, I could not resist the temptation to collar him in turn and chuck him out of the door. He was too dumfounded at my audacity to make any resistance.

When I turned back to Miss Dicey she was laughing a little hysterically.

"You take the whole thing for a joke," she exclaimed. "Yet Powell has orders to shoot

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you if he thinks best, and"—she lowered her voice—"he has killed a man once."

"Really?" I exclaimed, with interest. "Whom?"

"I don't know. Somebody in Russia. Powell is an Englishman, but he has been a great deal in Russia. He has had some of the most hair-breadth escapes from the police."

Her eyes were bright with a pleasing enthusiasm.

"He must be just the man for your line of business," I said, by way of congratulating her.

"Yes—he's a little—timid!" she observed, thoughtfully. "But we hope to brace him up. We haven't employed him very long."

"I'm sure you will brace him up," I said. "There's good stuff in Powell. I can see that."

"Yes—and he is very useful to us," she said. "If he were not a man, we should make him a Daughter of Desperation."

(It was really a beautiful gown Miss Dicey wore. The sleeves and neck and shoulders all

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seemed to be of close-lying lace; and then it went down her slim figure in an indescribable way suggestive of foaming water. She sat on the low box with all this splendour drawn up from the floor; I had risen and looked down at her, and as I noted these points in her appearance the name of her association rang strangely in my ears.)

"The Daughters of Desperation?" I asked, earnestly. "Tell me what can it be that you ladies despair of?"

A sombre look came into her face.

"Pardon me, desperation is not despair," she said, quickly. "Our name tells you nothing of what we think; it only tells you how we may be expected to act. Consider this and perhaps you will be readier to make the promise we require, before we can set you free."

"Since you must set me free sooner or later, Miss Dicey——"

"Ah, that is what you think!" she cried, and a curious, wide expression came about her eyes. "But do not be deceived, Mr. Silsbee. We are not obliged to set you free again."

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"What? You would keep me languishing here?" I asked, smiling down at her; "your prisoner for ever?"

But no responsive flush came into her face. Indeed, she had grown pale.

"Yes. We should never set you free again," she said, faintly.

"Well, I don't mind," I reassured her, for I hated to see her pain at the thought of what she proposed. "I don't mind, if you will promise to take supper with me every night."

She shook her head.

"Luncheon, then?" I urged.

"No, no, you would have nothing to eat!" she exclaimed, hurriedly, and in a tone of horrifying herself. "We should lock you up and go away and leave you."

"To starve?" I inquired. She nodded, dumbly.

"Well, you've made a good beginning," I suggested, with mild sarcasm, looking over the table where I had feasted.

"I thought it would be too cruel to start you in hungry," she said, brightening a little.

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"Good idea!" I returned. "My torments won't begin till to-morrow morning at eight thirty."

"Oh, no!" she cried, in dismay. "You will surely promise. See, I've brought a paper for you to sign."

She fumbled at her belt, but when I slowly shook my head she desisted.

"I couldn't dream of signing a paper," I assured her in a tone I meant to make as kind as it was firm.

"Oh, your word will do, your simple word!" she said, eagerly, and rose to her feet.

"I think the idea of my being buried alive is more horrible to you than it is to me," I suggested, humorously; but Miss Dicey was not disposed for any pleasantry whatsoever. She stretched out her hand to me with a child-like appeal.

"Promise, quick! I must go!" she said.

"I, Maurice Silsbee, do hereby promise," I said, gravely, as I closed my hand on her cold little fingers, "that you, Miss Dicey, shall never commit, with my contrivance, an act of

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mad folly or of moral wrong. I promise that I will prevent and hinder your proposed crime, or else persecute and punish the criminals to the uttermost stretch of my opportunities!"

She drew her hand away and stepped backward to the door. I was sorry to see that now she was fairly white.

"You would prevent burglary," she said, in a low tone, "and you force us to murder you. But murder is worse than burglary."

"No, I think not, in this case," I said, argumentatively. "There are mitigating circumstances to your killing me. You may be said to do it in self-defence." (She winced at nearly every word, and I built on this evidence of her sensitiveness.) "But Miss Bushnell trusts you, has made you her bridesmaids. And to take advantage of such trust in the way you propose would be worse than murder—it would be black treason!"

She shook her head with animation.

"You are wonderfully mistaken," she declared, "though appearances are against us. I have told you already that though Miss

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Bushnell chose us for her bridesmaids she cannot consider us her friends. There is open war between us. She makes fun of everything we hold sacred. She jeers at the Cause of Humanity. She knows very well how we feel toward her."

"But still, in this most solemn hour of her life," I urged, "she has laid aside past animosity——"

"There was nothing solemn about it to her!" cried Miss Dicey. "She wanted a big, showy wedding, and she could not find twelve girls who were near enough the right size and colour and shape, to make up her train without pressing us into service. We were so convenient, with our habit of coming up here now and then, as we do, to camp in my old house, and she begged and teased and coaxed us before we consented. But first we made it plain we had not forgiven her. This was a truce. And it is over."

There was a long pause. Miss Dicey's hand sought the handle of the door.

"One more question," I begged. "Suppose

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you succeed in getting this silver to-night—and in making me harmless. What do you ladies plan to do in the future?"

"Live for the Cause as we have in the past," she returned.

"But won't you live in horrible fear lest your crime should come to light?" I asked.

"We mean to leave the country," she explained. "We mean to go to our colony."

"Oh, you have a colony?"

"We are going to establish one. We mean to set up an independent anarchy; but I can't tell you where. That is a secret."

"No harm in telling me, since I must die."

"You may have writing materials here," said Miss Dicey. "You might set down the facts if I revealed them; and if, after a long lapse of time, your bones were found, there would be the means of tracing us, identifying us, punishing us."

"You are keen!" I cried, admiringly.

"But if you are really interested in our colony," said she, "why won't you fulfil the one condition of our entire confidence? All we ask

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of you is silence. Promise not to stir up trouble for us and I will describe to you minutely the organisation and working of our association. You shall know all about the Daughters of Desperation, their hopes and plans, and their past achievements. And then you will go free. You can walk out of this grim prison into the fresh starlight night, richer by an interesting secret."

"You tempt me," I returned, "but the habit of perfect rectitude is still strong. I can never, no, never, be brought to connive at a burglary!"

There was a sound outside. Powell was talking to somebody in low tones. Miss Dicey hardened her face.

"I must take with me all that remains of this supper," she said, sternly.

"Let me help you pack it up," I begged.

Together we returned the things to the basket in great haste. Miss Dicey left only the spread-cloth and the two burning candles.

"It would be too horrible," she murmured, "to leave you in the dark!"

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"Besides, if you extinguished the candles," I added, "you might find it difficult to find your way to the door."

She evidently saw no point to this. Basket in hand, and with a tragic gravity, she turned to me once more.

"Good-bye!" she said.

"Au revoir!" said I.

"Never!" she said, solemnly, and left me.

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OUTSIDE my prison door Miss Dicey had some low-voiced converse with the new-comer. I gathered from what I could not help but overhear that somebody was urging her to return to me on some errand or another. "Do it yourself!" came Miss Dicey's voice, pretty clearly. "I've had enough of him!" Then they both tried to persuade Powell to enter my cell. Powell decidedly opposed himself. Finally, Miss Houghton (for it was she) saw that she must do her own errand, and she came into the vault, closing the door behind her.

Her dress was exactly like Miss Dicey's, but her bearing was so very different that she formed a new picture in it. There was something angelic, unearthly, and sedate about the way she approached my table, and deposited before me a number of small packages and vials. I observed with great interest that they

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were marked as containing chloroform, laudanum, prussic acid, and such like sedatives.

"Are these for me?" I asked, modestly.

"As you please," she answered, with a gentleness quite unexpected in the ardent Miss Houghton. "We are unwilling that you should suffer horribly here. We leave with you these certain means of escape from a lingering death."

"Why, thank you!" said I. "But why so many kinds, Miss Houghton?"

"We want to be sure to hit upon one that will be pleasant for you to take."

"Oh!"

"I want to leave this thought with you," she said, with a gentle unction as she retreated toward the door. "To die by your own hand, and at a moment when your death is most called for by the advancement of civilisation, is to die grandly. I hope the idea will strengthen you."

"I'm sure it would," I said, "if I only understood it! Won't you please explain?"

"You are a sacrifice," she stated.

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"Yes, I see that," I returned. "But to what?"

"To necessity."

"I have never worshipped necessity, Miss Houghton. I wish I could be offered up upon a higher altar."

"Ah, you have the true spirit!" she exclaimed, with a brightening face. "You wish to make your death as significant as possible."

"Yes, indeed!" I cried, glad to have pleased her. "I should hate to waste my death. I have but one."

An eager colour came into her fair face, and seeming to forget that she was at the door to leave me she leaned against it and regarded me with interest.

"I have met very few people who hold the same high view," she observed. "Nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand will deliberately choose to die by accident. They set no value whatever upon their death. Yet it is the crowning as well as the closing act of life."

"Exactly!" I said, heartily, though I was

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a little puzzled as to what she was driving at.

"Each one of us has a priceless treasure at his disposal," explained Miss Houghton, in a warm tone of argument, "a treasure with which he can buy honour, fame, gratitude, or quiet, according as he chooses the time to spend it. Each one has this price in his own keeping; and yet a man will wait and wait till he is stricken by some mortal disease, and killed without having any choice in it whatsoever; so that his great privilege is filched away. The only thing he can buy with his death, then, is a relief from pain."

"How well you express it!" said I.

"Death is a force which man cannot combat, but which he might so easily control!" cried Miss Houghton, waving her hand toward the little collection of drugs on the table.

"Nothing easier!" I cried. "There is positively no reason why every man jack of us shouldn't have his own death in his pocket."

"Then you are opposed to war, to capital punishment. and to the yet unexposed abuses

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of labour?" she asked, eagerly. "You are opposed, Mr. Silsbee, to every institution which gives men power over the lives of others?"

"Yes, I am strongly opposed to them," I declared. "Aren't you?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried, enthusiastically. "All men should have equal right to choose their own time of ending. Education should be directed as much toward teaching a man the right moment of his own exit from the stage of life as it is now directed to teach him the part he shall play. It is time we ceased to act upon the superstition that a grim Fate presides at our death—that it is the pre-ordained cutting of a thread. The shears are given in our own hands in these latter days. Mankind is ready for a higher education on this matter."

"But this higher education," I argued, "calls for absolute self-determination."

I had her there. She had no more idea of what I meant by self-determination than I had myself. But, like the intelligent person she was, she respected what she did not understand.

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"I am gratified," she said, "to meet a person who has evidently been thinking deeply on this subject."

"It is one that just at present interests me in a very lively way," I observed, looking at the little parcels she had brought me.

"And me also," she said. "I am writing an article for the *Hammer* on this question, and I will confess you have given me a new aspect under which I must consider it. Perhaps you can help me a little. How do you use the term self-determination?"

"Give me the general trend of the argument of your article," I said, readily. "If I can make any suggestions I will only be too happy."

"I've begun with a consideration of the incalculable benefits that accrue to the race by the timely deaths of certain individuals, and the enormous set-backs in race-development due to unpremeditated, ill-timed, and procrastinated deaths. I urge the formation of a race conscience on this subject——"

"A race conscience?" I interrupted. "What

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kind of a thing is that?" But Miss Houghton was in full train, and went on, unheeding my question :

"It is not that the race has lacked interest in this question," said she, "but heretofore our whole endeavour has been to devise more means for fighting off death. It is as absurd as if we should declare lightning-rods the only possible application of what we know of electricity. The enormous endeavour that goes into hygiene and medicine has only negative results. It is taking no hold of the problem, indeed, but at the wrong end. Suicide, properly guided, is the highest duty as well as the greatest privilege of civilised man. That is my general argument, Mr. Silsbee. I want to end the article with a strong appeal to my readers not to throw their precious deaths away, but to use them in some noble cause, not to waste and belittle it as if it were no more than an unlooked-for accident—a stumbling in the road."

"I grasp the grandeur of your idea, Miss Houghton!" I cried, with enthusiasm. "Con-

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sider me your convert. I too will die when I get ready, and for something very much worth my while. Take back your poisons, Miss Houghton. They no longer tempt me. Give them away with copies of the *Hammer*. I am a free and enlightened man!"

"Ah, I am glad!" she cried, impulsively, and she stepped forward with extended hand. "I told the others from the first I believed you would be intelligent if one took pains to reason with you. Now you are indeed free; and see how little we have asked of you?—only your word that you won't interfere with us to-night, neither witness against——"

"I can promise you only what I promised Miss Dicey," I told her as we shook hands, "that I will do all in my power to stop this burglary now; or if I fail in that, to see that you and your accomplices are tracked and caught and punished."

She fell back to the door again, looking as though she could not believe her ears.

"I thought you meant you were of our opinions," she gasped.

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"I am with you in theory, but against you in practice," I explained, regretfully, really sorry to have disappointed her.

"Then you must die!" she said,—rather wildly, if I contrasted it with her late ease in discussing this topic.

"Oh, I don't think so," I said, deprecatingly.

"Yes, yes! You don't know how deeply you are buried here!" she cried. "Actually buried alive!" She visibly shuddered.

"Don't allow your thoughts to dwell on it," I urged, "if it is disagreeable to you."

"No, I shall not! I cannot!" she sighed, her hand on the door-handle. "I am called to other things."

"And won't you send me a copy of the *Hammer* when your article appears?" I asked, politely. "I shall have very little to occupy my mind while I pine away here, and your paper sincerely interests me."

"Oh, don't pine away," she entreated me as she opened the door to go out. "Pray do take the poison."



"I heard the footsteps and voices die away."



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"Don't worry about me," I begged her. "I shall get along very comfortably, I'm sure."

She surveyed me once more from head to foot with a look of horrified pity; a shudder shook her slight frame, and she was gone.

The bolts were fastened heavily outside. Then I heard Miss Houghton's and Powell's footsteps and voices die away.

My starvation had begun.

The candles Miss Dicey had left me were not long. I saw that it behoved me to make what arrangements I could for a night's rest. A barrel in my vault was filled with the dry straw-casings of wine-bottles. With these and with the long coat I should have worn as groomsman I made a bed on the floor, and extinguished my candles and lay down to make the best of a poor couch.

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I LAY down, but not to sleep. Though I now felt reasonably secure from interruption, I found it hard to compose myself for rest. On the whole, my evening had been delightful, but in one respect it had been disappointing. I was only too well aware why I was dissatisfied, and tried to divert my thoughts with a review of all that had passed between my callers and myself. Entertaining as it was, it could not subdue a strong if unreasonable sense that the third Daughter of Desperation, Miss Halliburton, owed me a visit. It was not that I felt neglected. Miss Dicey with the supper had been kind, Miss Houghton with the poisons had been still kinder, and had it not been for their visits it would not have occurred to me to expect any attention from their leader. As it was, I well knew I had no actual claim on her time. Still, the thought haunted me that had she consid-

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ered me at all she would have come for a minute or two, just to see whether I was comfortable—whether there was anything I wanted.

I wanted very distinctly to see her again.

As the half-hours dragged away I pictured the robbery in progress. The whole deplorable action had a haunting charm for me, a charm borrowed from the personalities of the Daughters of Desperation. I never doubted but that they would secure the silver. I even entertained the thought that they might escape with it. But it never occurred to me that they would be lost to my view. The world was doubtless wide, and many the byways of malefactors; but to me fate could not be so unkind as to cut me off midway in my adventure. Through Josh, the dog, I had been plunged in; through some slight means, I knew, I would be carried farther. Somehow, somewhere, I would meet these ladies again; and I was resolved that no resentment on my part for that they had buried me alive should cloud the pleasure of that meeting.

Yes, Miss Halliburton had moments of

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great loveliness. Those dark-grey eyes, that rising and waning shell-pink of her face, that low voice, that straight and lofty bearing! For a moment, when she had caressed Josh, her expression had wonderfully softened.

Josh? I thought of him as having already given his new owners the slip and returned to his native gutters to hunt the rats by night and sniff lazily about the sun-blessed squalors by day. Perhaps he was at this moment flattering some belated pedestrian by following him affectionately through the dark street, while I, his victim of the morning, lay starving to death in a dungeon. I felt no rancour at the thought; the dog had but followed the dumb promptings of his devilish nature. He had made trouble out of circumstance, as the bee makes honey out of nectarine.

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There was a light step in the cellar passageway. I started hastily to my feet and lit my candles. Certainly, one of my captors was coming to my door. Could it be the leader? Was my existence to be recognised at last?

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Whoever it was stood silent outside my door, as if to listen. I remained standing quiet. Then came a low voice, calling my name. I recognised it with an inward start. It was Miss Halliburton.

"Come in!" I cried. She had difficulties with all the bolts, and I could not help her there. At last the door opened and she appeared on the threshold in the light of my candles.

I observed with some anxiety that she was pale. Like the other two, she wore the blue, lacy gowns of her office as bridesmaid; but, unlike the others, she let its flounces trail to the floor while her hands were locked before her. In that low frame she looked supremely tall and slight; yet neither her queenly bearing nor the resolute calm of her face could conceal that she was agitated. Her breath came fast, and when she spoke her voice played on me strangely by its tremors.

"Mr. Silsbee, have you taken any poison yet?" she demanded.

For one glowing moment I believed it was

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concern for my life that had brought her, white and agitated, to my cell in the dead of night; but she swiftly undeceived me.

"Because if you haven't, and if you are feeling pretty well, I want to ask a great favour of you."

"I hope nothing has gone wrong?" I said, trying to be amiable in my disappointment.

"Yes, with the burglary!" she exclaimed, "and it was your dog."

"Don't tell me," I cried, in a tone of alarm, "that any disaster has befallen the priceless He-za-si-to?"

"Yes. Gardiner stepped on his paw," she returned, with a steady mien, though her voice sank to faintness.

"Heavens! Where did it happen?"

"In the Bushnells' area!"

"Miss Halliburton, do you mean to tell me that you took that innocent little dog with you upon your unhallowed errand?" I asked, in a stern tone.

"He attached himself to me. He wouldn't leave me——"



“Powell and Gardiner ran away.”





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"Did he go to the wedding?" I inquired, with hidden glee. I saw a long vista of possible occurrences.

"He went to the reception. I locked him up for the ceremony, but he suffered so——"

"Naturally, you would shrink from depriving a little dog of his liberty," said I.

"Naturally," she returned, with calm. She had by this time collected herself and spoke with her usual low-voiced composure. "He followed to the Bushnells, and in coming up the area steps Gardiner stepped on his paw."

"Did the poor, injured darling make any noise?" I inquired.

"Noise? He roused the house!"

"So that was the end of the burglary!" I exclaimed.

"Of course we couldn't go on. Powell and Gardiner ran away."

"And you ladies?"

"Of course we were so anxious about Josh we couldn't consider anything else," she returned, seriously. "We hurried him upstairs and had Mrs. Bushnell and her maids running

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about fetching witch-hazel and linen and hot and cold water—and Josh lay in my lap—and he held up his poor little paw in a very pathetic way!”

She was visibly affected, and I begged her to spare me the harrowing details; though, to tell the truth, I could have listened to the account of Josh’s sufferings a good while longer, accompanied as it was by an unforeseen play of expression on Miss Halliburton’s usually impassive face.

“But it wasn’t very serious, after all,” she continued, more quietly, “for when Mrs. Bushnell’s maid took him from me and set him on the floor he ran around quite freely. When we looked he held up one paw, but it wasn’t always the same one. He would forget.”

And for one delightful moment Miss Halliburton smiled. It was one radiant flash, and it was gone instantly.

“Mrs. Bushnell did not appreciate Josh,” she continued. “She asked us please to take our dog home and keep him home. She had

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seen more than she wanted of him, with this on top of his appearance at the wedding-reception. Miss Dicey had some words with her. I think Miss Dicey rather blamed Mrs. Bushnell because Josh had been hurt in her area."

There was another flickering smile. I was entranced.

"Go on," I begged. "How did Mrs. Bushnell excuse herself?"

"She didn't. She wanted to know what business Josh had in her area. Of course we couldn't explain. And she wanted to know why we were all up so late, and why we hadn't changed our gowns, and when we told her we hadn't had time she wanted to know what kept us so busy in the middle of the night. It was very embarrassing. Miss Dicey, who is in charge of all the prevarication, had a dreadful time with her, and we were very glad to come away home."

"So that is the end of the adventure!" I exclaimed with relief.

Her expression changed. The resolute and

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calm Miss Halliburton of the morning stood before me.

"By no means, Mr. Silsbee. All this did not happen till after we had succeeded in getting all the silver out and the safe closed again as if nothing had happened. The accident occurred as we left the area. The silver lies in two hampers under the piazza steps of the Bushnell house. It is too heavy for us girls to handle alone, and as the two men have run away and don't come back——"

"You want me to help you?" I asked, with sudden insight. She bowed her head in acquiescence.

I summoned my moral strength to my aid and spoke to her severely.

"Is it possible, Miss Halliburton, that you have so soon forgotten my attitude to this whole affair?"

"Circumstances have changed, Mr. Silsbee, and your attitude should change with them," she returned, gravely. "Of course you couldn't make terms with us when we appeared as the powerful foes of that social or-

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der in which you believe. Now we are helpless—in a great predicament. We throw ourselves upon your magnanimity.”

“Let me suggest to you that you are in no such very serious straits. All you have to do is to renounce the silver, as Powell and Gardiner have done. The Bushnells will find it and no harm will be done.”

“Mr. Silsbee, I have come simply to ask a favour of you, not at all for your advice,” she returned, icily. “I ask you to carry some hampers which it goes beyond our strength to lift. I suppose you will not refuse?”

“If I refuse, I am justified,” I returned, and now that a light look of disdain came into her face I continued still more firmly: “It’s not because the action is disreputable that I refuse, but because it is supremely ridiculous. I hold it my highest duty, transcending all moral obligations, to maintain my own sanity——”

“What is the point of all this consideration of yourself?” she interrupted me, cuttingly. “It seems to me out of place at a moment

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when we three helpless and embarrassed girls are asking you to consider *us!*”

I was struck by her words, but ventured a meek protest.

“I have been considering you all day, Miss Halliburton.”

“All day? We’ve asked nothing till now. What have you done?”

“I would modestly call your attention, Miss Halliburton, to the things I *haven’t* done.”

“But as our prisoner——”

“*Your prisoner?*”

“Well, aren’t you that?”

“You force the issue, Miss Halliburton. Well, then, I will state that, since I am a man of least average physical strength, I see no barrier between myself and liberty. To put it more succinctly, I feel that I could walk out of this hole as soon as I pleased. I may add that if for any reason I thought best to take you along——”

Her look silenced me; but I had struck fire from flint, and was satisfied to continue on the other line.

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"I may say that I ceased to be your prisoner except by my own consent as soon as Powell and Gardiner left me here alone. Please consider, Miss Halliburton, that had I cared to spend my time at the door with my pocket-knife or a fire-brand I might still have served Spoffard as best man to-day. I was afraid of troubling you ladies if I appeared at the wedding, so I left my prison door untouched."

She turned and looked at the door with an unconscious dismay.

"Moreover," I continued, "the door has not even been locked for a greater part of the evening. Miss Dicey and Miss Houghton have been here to offer me, each in turn, refreshment, and have been kind enough to spend some time in talking to me. If at any moment during the stay of either I had cared to—ah—risk her displeasure——"

"You forget Powell," she said, quickly, "and he was armed!"

"Well, granting for argument's sake that Powell cowed me," I said, "what keeps me

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here now, Miss Halliburton? You are alone."

There was a long pause. She stood motionless regarding me with mingled pain and anger; her head was thrown back, her brows drawn into a deep fold; the strong emotion depicted on her face touched me profoundly; and when, the next moment, two great tears rolled from under her lashes I was reduced to dust.

"Miss Halliburton, I crave your pardon!" I cried, in the greatest compunction. "Believe me, I am not the brute I talk like. There is no more violence in me than in a nine-day kitten; and I should no more dream of approaching the door while you stand there than if you were an angel with a flaming sword!"

She drew a long breath and battled for self-control, but her reply was tremulous.

"It isn't that that makes me cry," she returned. "It is nothing to us whether you go or stay, if you refuse to help us. But unless we can get a man to help us, we have failed

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to-night ; and you are the only one we can possibly ask."

"On these simple terms," I answered her, sadly, "I can no longer refuse. Lead on, Miss Halliburton."

One last, longing look I cast about my simple cell, already grown dear to me as a quiet retreat ; one sigh I gave for even the incomplete rest of my humble bed of straw. In this cell, on this rude couch, I had spent the last hours of my innocence. I was going forth to stain my hands with theft, that I might save my reputation as a cavalier.

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FROM the Diceys' garden Miss Halliburton and I entered the Bushnells' grounds by a gap in the hedge. We crossed the smooth lawn, keeping rather in the black shadow of the trees, and so approached the house. As we neared it I was aware of two light figures swaying toward us. Miss Dicey and Miss Houghton had evidently despaired of Miss Halliburton's winning me for the service, and were making a heroic effort to drag the big, heavy hamper between them. When I came up they relinquished the task with long breaths of relief. Not a word was said. I shouldered the hamper, and by the light of the stars I followed my three guides back to the hedge.

The garden regained, we struck down toward the end where I had entered it and came upon a dark building set well behind some spruces. I presently learned this was Miss



“I shouldered the hamper and followed
my guides.”



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Dicey's stable. One of the ladies opened the sliding door of the carriage-house just wide enough to admit us, and when we were all in the pitch-black interior she closed it again.

I stood still with my burden till a match was struck and a lantern lit. Then I saw before me a horse, ready harnessed to a large, square-topped waggon, of which the curtains were down.

Not a sound was made. With a motion Miss Halliburton indicated that I was to put down the hamper close behind the waggon on the floor, and then that I was to follow Miss Houghton, who was leaving the carriage-house again.

It gratified me—since I needs must be plunged in crime—that my accomplices were people of such business-like quiet and despatch. Certainly Miss Halliburton was an able leader. It was a pleasure to obey her with alacrity. I hurried after Miss Houghton.

We traversed the way back to the Bushnell house in silence, found the second hamper under the high piazza-steps, and brought it back

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to the stable. We had not been long, but already the work of transferring the silver from the first hamper to the waggon was well advanced.

They had chosen a large tool-chest to hold the stolen goods, and were packing the silver in with excelsior and cotton-batting by the light of a lantern standing on the front seat of the waggon. Miss Dicey was in the waggon packing, while Miss Halliburton stood at the back handing her the pieces from the hamper and the packing materials from two barrels as they were needed.

I offered to relieve Miss Halliburton. Low as my tone was she laid an affrighted finger on her lips. Then she indicated by gesture again that I might mount into the waggon and take Miss Dicey's place.

As I stepped up inside I saw Josh curled up on the front seat beside the lantern, fast asleep. Miss Dicey, making way for me, took him up to find room to sit down, and held him in her lap. She faced me and braced her slippered toes against the chest, and she and



“They were packing the silver by the light
of a lantern.”



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Josh, with his ears cocked up, watched me narrowly in every motion. I did not mind the lady's eyes, dark and serious and anxious, but the devilish gaze of that unblinking little dog was scarcely endurable. Involuntarily I would glance up, again and again to meet it. It seemed to me Josh was plotting mischief, and I am sure I saw a change of expression on his face when I came to pack with the rest my own gift to Mrs. Spoffard.

Among the last pieces that Miss Halliburton handed up to me was an enormous silver punch-bowl. Its rim came even with the top of the chest as I placed it, and as I saw that Miss Halliburton was running low with her supply of cotton and excelsior I left the hollow of the bowl unfilled, using my packing material to make all solid around it.

All this while, it seems, Miss Houghton had been the look-out at the crack of the door. Suddenly she sounded a low whistle. It was evidently an alarm. Miss Dicey started nervously, reached up with haste, and turned down the lantern. It went out.

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Now, in the dark, I heard Miss Dicey descending cautiously from the front of the wagon. I, following her example, sprang out at the back and came against her on the carriage-house floor.

"I beg ten thousand—" I began, involuntarily. "Sh-sh-sh!" came imperatively from all around me.

I don't know how long we all stood motionless, almost breathless, in the dark, listening for a repetition of the noise that had alarmed our guard. It was long enough for me to drink to the dregs the cup of evil conscience. It was long enough for me to dream a long and horrid dream—of seizure by the police, of recognition by my old friends, of conviction along with my three new ones.

But it was a false alarm. Gradually we all rallied. Some one opened the carriage-house door and we all ventured out into the starlit night. There we listened again. Then, first in whispers, and after a time in low tones, we told each other that it was nothing.

"And now we must make haste," said Miss

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Halliburton, "for the dawn is not far off. Is the box ready?"

"All ready," I replied, "except that the lid must be screwed down."

I hurried to the waggon again, climbed in at the back, put down the lid of the chest in order to climb over it, reached the lantern and re-lighted it. I had no sooner accomplished this than Miss Halliburton appeared at the back, holding out screw-driver and screws to me. There was no time to look into the chest again to see whether all was right. Not that I doubted this, having packed it myself. With all possible speed I put in the screws; the holes were ready for them.

Miss Halliburton now mounted to the front seat of the waggon, and, all in her lacy gown as she was, gathered up the reins.

"Will you go with me, Mr. Silsbee?" she asked, with a turn of her head toward me, and I answered, briefly, "To the bitter end!"

"May I unfasten the horse now?" came Miss Dicey's low voice.

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"May I open the door?" came from Miss Houghton.

"The lantern should be put out first," said Miss Halliburton, taking it up.

"Go ahead," I answered them all in a stage-whisper. "I've got the last screw in."

I was still driving it when the lantern went out; I heard the snap as Miss Dicey unhitched the horse; the roll of the door as Miss Houghton pushed it back. Before I had finished putting in the screw we were in motion.

Once more I felt an access of admiration at the despatch and silence with which our business was being accomplished. For the first time there flashed upon me a vision of success. It was but a moment of delirious hope, and my sober judgment made me instantly reject it. By the time I had climbed over to a seat beside the fair driver I had renewed my inward attitude of patient acquiescence in my doom.

"Will you let me drive?" I asked.

She handed me the reins and directed me where to turn. Our way was out past the

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house we had robbed and down Dewey Avenue for a quarter of a mile. Then, to my gratification, we crossed a park and seemed to be getting out of town altogether.

"From here it is a straight road," said my companion, and, as if relieved at having no longer to direct me, she turned away and leaned to the side of the waggon with a light sigh.

"I'm afraid you are very tired," I said, with concern.

"I suppose we all are," she returned, coldly. And after that she pained me by sitting very erect.

I made several ineffectual attempts at conversation. She snubbed me by a merciless silence. She would only speak to suggest that I might urge the horse a little. When I considered all that I was sacrificing for her that night I felt a profound sense of injury. I was rather vaguely aware that a little cordiality from her would be of value to me all out of proportion to the effort it would cost her. If she had only sat with her head turned slightly

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toward me it would perhaps have been enough. I would have been the last to underestimate the strain she was under as the responsible leader in this unhallowed enterprise. I should not have expected her to enter upon small talk, but it seemed to me that, now that I was enrolled as a member of the gang, I should have been honoured with some confidence or rewarded with a few kind words from my chief.

“Would it be indiscreet in me to ask where we are going?” I said at length, veiling my irritation under an air of humility. She started as if reminded of me for the first time, and then quickly and fully answered me in the tone of formally reporting to one who had a right to know:

“We are going to Hopperville station, two miles out of Keswick, where there is an express office. The agent is never there before six o'clock in the morning. We leave this chest on the platform there with a letter to the agent tacked upon it. In this letter we ask him to ship this chest of tools by the morning train,

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C. O. D., to the address on the cover; and we ask him to keep the receipt till we call for it. We sign ourselves—Shephatiah Sneed.”

“Shephatiah Sneed!” I exclaimed. “Where, under heaven, did you get that name?”

“In the Bible, after much searching,” she returned, with calm.

“But couldn’t you have found a more likely name?” I asked.

“We tried to find one more unlikely,” she returned. “Don’t you see, Mr. Silsbee, that we want to avoid any possible coincidence by which, if the silver should be recaptured, some innocent man of the community whose name we had unwittingly appropriated might be involved?”

“But such a man—say you had taken the name John Smith—could have easily proved his innocence, and your missive stuck to the box would have had a much more plausible signature,” I urged.

“I don’t think we should want to buy greater safety to ourselves at the expense of possible fright and probable inconvenience to

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a fellow being," said Miss Halliburton, rather sternly.

This gave me food for thought; and presently, just to keep up the conversation, I asked her whether she was sure she was consistent.

"When you proposed to bury me alive," I ventured, mildly, "did you consider then the possible fright and probable inconvenience of a fellow-being?"

"The cases are not parallel," she returned, rather sternly. "The supposed John Smith is probably a poor man, a member of the oppressed class to which we ourselves belong, and for whose betterment we are struggling. You, Mr. Silsbee, belong to the rich and powerful minority whose downfall we have sworn!"

"Rich? I? I barely live!" I exclaimed. "I can't afford polo, my favourite game; I can't afford a steam-yacht. I am miserably chained down to my work, the management of an insurance company, with little leisure and few pleasures. My duties grind me down,

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and my salary, when I compare it to the sums I should like to spend, is a miserable pittance."

She made no reply, and I thought she had relapsed into one of her hopeless silences; but Miss Halliburton was evidently but considering my case, for presently she gladdened me by saying:

"I am sorry we so misunderstood you; I am sorry we mistook you for one of the capitalist class. If we had known that you were overworked and underpaid we should have handled the situation differently."

"You would not have decided that I must die?" I queried.

"We might, indeed, have called upon you to lay down your life for other sufferers, but we should have been deeply grieved at the necessity."

"Ah, I wish the cold world where my lot is cast were more thickly sprinkled with beings as tender-hearted as yourself, Miss Halliburton!"

"I am very tender-hearted," observed this

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human icicle, with even calm, but rather in the tone of admitting a serious fault.

"You do not regret it, I hope," said I.

"I never regret anything," she returned, stoically. "It is against my principles; but I often find it inconvenient to be so alive to the sufferings of others."

"That is what has led you into the paths of social reform, I suppose?"

"Yes—that and other circumstances."

"The circumstance of your being somewhat alone in the world?" I questioned.

"Yes."

Her tone was bleak. I had a sudden light attack of fever; a semi-delirious vision rose upon my mind. I saw myself accepting the mad situation, making the most of the fact that I was for ever cut off from any reputable past. I saw myself acting in the character of outlaw, no longer at the bidding of chivalry, but in response to a need of my own. Before us in the half-dark of the summer night loomed the mountains.

Suppose I took the matter of choosing the

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road and urging the horse into my own hands? Suppose I sought those mountains, this Daughter of Desperation at my side? In some cave we could hide the silver, stable the horse, and ourselves lead a wild, free life. There would be berries, roots, mushrooms, nuts in season; there would be game, and there would be fish in the silent, hidden, green-shadowed lakes among the summits.

The slim figure was erect beside me, the proud little head turned resolutely away. But this girl, with the steady, cold front to the world, was as mad of action as any wild gipsy. And her ice was thin. Had I not seen her smiles, her tears? Had I not heard the passionate tremors of which her low voice was capable?

If I should tell her now that she was captured? Or rather, that she was rescued for ever from the world, from the police, from the reforms and desperation of the great city—that she was rescued for ever from herself? Surely, it was in my power to pour such words into her ears as would melt her, free her,

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win her—bring her smiling and weeping to my arms!

But I sat still and drove on to the station. One swallow does not make a summer; one crime could not make an outlaw of me. Though we were a pair of thieves, making away with our spoils, though we were a girl and a man driving alone through the night, we were still first and foremost a lady and gentleman who had not met till the day before. Great is society! Great is convention!

We would go to State's prison, not to a mountain-cave.

"There is the station!" said Miss Halliburton.

Inwardly I cursed the station, together with all the moral influences of my youth. But my fever had gone down; the fresh wind in our faces warned us of morning, and we had the last act of our enterprise to perform with haste.

We drew up at the dark and quiet little country station beside the tracks. Without difficulty we backed the waggon to the freight-

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platform, and with the use of the lever and rollers which Miss Halliburton produced from the waggon I had the box out. Then my companion produced the note signed Shephatiah Sneed and tacked it to the lid of the chest where the agent could not but find it, and we made off with guilty haste.

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THE horse was anxious to get home to his breakfast oats, and we lost no time on our return. This was well, for day brightened, and we overtook and passed several milk and truck waggons on their morning way to Keswick. It was light enough now, had we met any persons squarely, for them to note our not very usual appearance. Miss Halliburton, in her bridesmaid's gown; both of us hatless; our unusual rig for a pleasure-drive, and the unusual hour for that—if these things would not have drawn upon us the suspicion of the passer-by, I say he would have been a man of little imagination.

But chance-hap favoured us, and we entered Keswick's still quiet streets, crossed the park, and made our home-run without serving as worm to any early bird of curiosity. Miss Halliburton, who, as far as possible, had kept

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herself anxiously withdrawn from view since day had surprised us, gave a very human sigh of relief as we entered the gate of the Dicey place.

For my own part, the nearer we approached headquarters the more uneasy I grew as to what might have happened there during our absence, and my own relief was great when we came in sight of the stable and saw Miss Dicey and Miss Houghton evidently awaiting us impatiently. They were seated side by side on one of last night's hampers, just within the carriage-house door. Not that they had been there since we had left them, for they had exchanged their ceremonial costumes for fresh, pretty morning dresses, and when Miss Halliburton descended from the waggon and stood between them she looked fagged and wilted by contrast. They received their sister in desperation with enthusiasm. They showered praises upon her and delicate little caresses for the thing she had accomplished. Evidently the three considered the adventure at an end, while to me the serious side of it was but be-

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gun. I looked momentarily for the officers of the law.

"Neither Powell nor Gardiner have turned up yet," Miss Dicey volunteered when we had finished our report, "and Josh, he is gone, too."

"Josh gone!" cried Miss Halliburton, as if this were a straw too much, and that frown of pain I had seen the night before, when her tears had flowed, came upon her brow.

"Josh goes rat-hunting between midnight and breakfast," I hastened to reassure her. "Fixed habit; but he never fails to turn up."

They all seemed greatly relieved.

"Do you think you will need the horse again?" I inquired of Miss Dicey, just by way of reminding them that they now had their own safety to consider.

"No, indeed; and Mr. Silsbee, *could* you stable him and feed him, since Powell isn't here?" she returned. "Thank you *so* much. So good of you to help us out. Breakfast will be ready when you come to the house."

"And we've had your things from the cellar

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carried up to Powell's room, over this carriage-house," added Miss Houghton, pointing to the stairs, "in case you want to refresh yourself; and come right to the house, won't you?"

"Breakfast will be on the back piazza," said Miss Dicey.

Miss Halliburton's eyes were seeking the distant horizon. I should have as soon expected a marble statue to cordially second the others' invitation. But I accepted it. What could I do else? My associates in crime were in no wise alive to all our danger. We were quietly to breakfast, all together. It was my part to await developments.

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Miss Dicey wore pink that morning, Miss Houghton pale green, and Miss Halliburton had changed her gown when I joined them on the piazza to one of fresh white, in which she looked severely beautiful. She sat manipulating the coffee-machine as I came up the steps, and had no time to give me more than a cold little bow of welcome. But Miss Houghton,

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who was cooking eggs in a blazer, and Miss Dicey, who was going back and forth into the house fetching things for the breakfast-table, received me in most friendly fashion. I was permitted to hull the strawberries, and to open the box of "No-Cookine," the breakfast-cereal, with my pocket-knife, and to fetch the plates from the sideboard of the dining-room, just inside; and the cream from the kitchen just beyond—together, I was useful and happy. For a few minutes the dark happenings of the night were forgotten. A cheerful party drew around the attractive table.

The piazza was to the south, but at that early hour it was cool and shady, while the garden was flooded with morning sunlight. Birds sang; in the breeze the last wistaria blossoms drifted to our white cloth. Miss Halliburton's coffee was strong and fragrant. I believed I was spending the last agreeable hour of my life. I would fain have forgotten the silver, but the conversation inevitably turned to it. My companions discussed the matter of how soon it could probably be delivered at their



“I was permitted to hull the strawberries.”



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apartment in the city; and I presently learned that their friend Stepnovo was now at their apartment, living there while he awaited the silver.

"It must reach him to-night," said Miss Dicey. "You know the apples I have sent down from here in the fall always come in one day."

"I do hope it won't be delayed," observed Miss Houghton, "because we can't go home till Stepnovo has smelted it all and carried it away; and if it takes him long we shall be dreadfully hurried in packing for the steamer."

"He can't do it very fast, working all alone," said Miss Halliburton. "But I think Powell and Gardiner will turn up to help him."

"I'm afraid not," said Miss Dicey. "They were pretty badly scared. I don't believe we shall see them till we get on board the steamer, and then they'll be disguised."

"Powell loves disguises," said Miss Halliburton, and there was a lovely flicker of a smile. "I wish he wouldn't. It makes him so conspicuous."

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"He is not a man of very good taste," said Miss Dicey, with regret. "But he is very useful. And I must say it's been a great convenience since we've been here that he assumed the disguise of a servant. We've had all sorts of work out of him that did not strictly further the Cause."

"What steamer are we going to take?" I asked Miss Halliburton upon my first opportunity.

She looked very much taken aback.

"*You're* not going to take any steamer!" she exclaimed.

"What, you are going to leave me behind?" I cried, incredulously. "I'm to bear the whole fury of the law while you escape to a place of safety!"

This impressed the other two. Miss Dicey thought it did not seem very fair; but Miss Halliburton relentlessly shook her head.

"It would be quite impossible for you to join our party, Mr. Silsbee," she said, quietly. "The people who are going are all anarchists. You wouldn't enjoy them, and they wouldn't

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enjoy you. Besides, there is no reason whatever why you should not return to your former walk of life."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "Please think how deadly tame it would be!"

"That's so," said Miss Dicey, sympathetically. "But then you may be hunted by the police, and *that* would be exciting."

"But there's no chance of Mr. Silsbee's even being suspected," said Miss Halliburton. "The silver won't be missed till the Spoffards come home at the end of the summer. Then the burglary will be traced to us, but they won't be able to reach us, so that will be all."

"You little know the capacity of the detectives!" I urged. "These trained men won't be long in tracing every move that each one of us has made last night. As for me, I shall be the first object of suspicion, for it will soon be known that on the day of Fred Spoffard's wedding I mysteriously disappeared. Neither shall I ever be able to give an account of myself."

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"No need," said Miss Halliburton; "we telegraphed."

"What did you say?"

"That, Mr. Silsbee, I would rather not tell you."

"But I ought to know," I pleaded. "It may save me from gaol some day to be able to tell the same story."

"I'm sorry, but it is impossible for me to tell," said Miss Halliburton; "you'll have to trust me that I made a good and sufficient excuse."

Though she spoke firmly, yet the gathering frown on her forehead and a shimmer in her eyes made me dread a sudden flow of tears, and I desisted, my curiosity unappeased.

"As for your feeling yourself in danger, Mr. Silsbee, we certainly won't urge you to stay in the country in that case," she continued, her face clearing again. "I recommend Australia to you."

"Are you going to Australia?" I asked.

"No, but you really can't go with us, Mr. Silsbee," said Miss Houghton, in an expostu-

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lating tone. "It would break up the whole colony to have a person like you along."

I was deeply hurt.

"What is there about me?" I asked, bitterly, "which makes you think I would not make a good anarchist? It is true I have strenuously objected to your breaking the law. I may say I have demurred all the way through, but actions speak louder than words. I am as deeply dyed in crime as any one of you."

"I think not," said the inexorable Miss Halliburton. "I remember that I gained you last night only by making a strong appeal to your instinct of chivalry; I doubt whether, accurately speaking, you have had any hand in the larceny committed last night."

"But connivance," I urged, "is also a crime."

"Connivance alone is not strong enough to qualify you for a place among us," said Miss Halliburton. "Every member of this emigrating party, except the wives of a few of our members—every one is at war with society upon one issue or another. Each one of us

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can claim to have struck one blow against the pernicious order that now exists, and each has either suffered martyrdom already, or has lived in hiding from the officers of tyranny."

"What is the idea," I rejoined with animation, "of drawing the line so closely about the merely disreputable? I should think that a few like myself, who have never been in gaol or in hiding, would give (I speak humbly) a rather pleasing variety to the social intercourse."

"Undoubtedly," she returned, with a light rise of colour, "but our aim is not to make things pleasant as possible, but rather to base our new colony on the firmest possible foundation. We can admit only those who have so thoroughly broken with all their ties here, that they can cherish no hope of return."

"And you yourselves are going with this permanent exile in view?" I asked, incredulously, looking from one to the other.

"Certainly! Why not? What else could we do?" they returned in chorus.

"But won't you—ah—suffer?" I asked.

Miss Dicey laughed, Miss Halliburton

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looked disdainful, Miss Houghton only would answer me.

"Suffer? Of course we shall suffer. We are going with a company of untrained and many-minded people into a wild country. But all living is suffering, and we are only going to escape mental torments to face mere physical ills. We shall welcome the change. What is exposure to the weather or famine or fever or even war with savages compared to the misery of being a civilised young woman?"

"I should think," I began, but she cut me short.

"You think, but you don't know," she said. "We know exactly how *you* think, but you can't remotely guess how we feel."

I was dumb. As for further urging my escort upon these would-be emigrants, that was out of the question. To turn the conversation I wondered, most unfortunately, whether Josh had yet come in.

They had forgotten the dog for the nonce, and were quite startled to remember him. Now they anxiously proposed to each other to

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make a thorough search of the premises. I was loath to see the table-round break up; the piazza was growing momentarily more pleasant as the mounting sun promised us an extra hot day, and I could have sat there sipping coffee and discoursing with the Daughters of Desperation for another hour or so.

But I diligently joined in the search for Josh.



"For two mortal hours we sought that dog."



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FOR two mortal hours we sought that dog in garden, stable, and along neighbouring streets and alleys. The air became hot; we were all languid. From time to time, as our search was still fruitless, there was that ominous gathering on Miss Halliburton's brow which bespoke her anxiety and disappointment. I watched her apprehensively. If she cried, I told myself there would be nothing for it—I should have to confess that the dog had never been mine, that he had now disappeared to seek his own haunts; and I should have to offer to go to the street where he had joined me and find him, and find his owner, and buy him at any cost.

But Miss Halliburton commanded herself. She did not cry. I once more vaunted Josh's loyalty, and basely promised my companions that he would return of his own accord.

“But perhaps some horrid, unprincipled

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wretches have *stolen* him!" suggested Miss Houghton.

The burglar-maidens looked at each other, appalled at the thought of such a depredation.

"If any one has stolen him, believe me, he won't keep him long," I hastened to reassure them.

Then I urged—we were in the garden at the time—that they should all retire to the house and rest. I promised to remain under the shade-trees myself and watch for Josh, giving an occasional whistle. If he did not return of his own accord before noon I proposed to put a notice in the evening paper.

They were so nearly fordone, with all the excitement and loss of sleep in the past night, that it was difficult to dissuade them from longer and fiercer exertions. Even when Miss Houghton and Miss Dicey wearily agreed to go in and rest awhile, the invincible Miss Haliburton still refused to join them. She said she had an important matter to attend to before she could sleep. It presently appeared that her business was nothing less than to call

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upon Mrs. Bushnell and apologise to her for the disturbance they had caused her the night before.

"I'm sure it isn't necessary," protested Miss Dicey, "and it will be awfully embarrassing for you to face her, after breaking into her house last night."

"Not in the least," returned Miss Halliburton. "I am never embarrassed. We had a perfectly good reason for breaking into her house last night, so there is nothing to be ashamed of." For a moment I felt I had solved Miss Halliburton; she was a humourist; but she continued most gravely: "I should be ashamed, however, of neglecting a simple courtesy. Mrs. Bushnell has always been very neighbourly when we have come up to stay in Keswick. I am going over to see her now."

"May I go with you?" I asked, inspired by her greatness to take a greater view of the value of my own personal safety.

She seemed willing to consider me as an escort, but Miss Dicey protested it was unwise

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I should be seen with her, and Miss Halliburton agreed.

"The best and safest thing for you to do, Mr. Silsbee, is to go straight home," said Miss Dicey, in a cordial way. "We're very, very grateful for what you've done; but now that there is nothing more, why should you run the risk of arrest, as we must? You had better say good-bye."

"Yes, Mr. Silsbee, your family will be troubled about you," suggested Miss Houghton, anxiously. "I'll find you a time-table. And one of us will drive you to the station."

"I couldn't think of troubling you. It's only a step," I returned, wondering wistfully whether my adventure was really to break off here and now. "I have a time-table with me, thank you, Miss Houghton."

Sadly I pulled it forth and consulted it. There was just time for me to make the next train into the city.

"That's nice!" exclaimed the young ladies in congratulatory tones.

"I was hoping I had an hour's grace to wait



“They all fell to urging me to stay.”



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for Josh," I said, with a cheerfulness that I took care should not conceal my disappointment. "I'm a little troubled at leaving my dear old companion without a word of farewell. He has been my faithful doggie, and I think he'll feel it. I suppose you ladies intend to take him with you into the dangers of sea-travel and pioneer life?"

There were exclamations of assent from all of them.

"Certainly we shall!"

"Nothing would induce us to be separated from Josh."

"We won't go till we find him."

And now Miss Dicey considered my case.

"It's a shame for Mr. Silsbee not to see him again!" she cried.

"You ought to stay over another train," said Miss Halliburton, in a tone of restrained reproach for my cold-heartedness.

And now they all fell to urging me to stay over to luncheon—not to do violence to my nature by tearing myself from Josh without farewell. They assured me that I exaggerated

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the danger I was in, that if I left without seeing my dog again I would probably regret it all my life.

I accepted with pleasure their invitation to luncheon.

Miss Halliburton was still intent upon her call at the Bushnells. I walked with her as far as the gap in the hedge and waited for her there. She returned in a very few minutes.

"Mrs. Bushnell was at breakfast, so I didn't stay," she explained to me as we approached the house. "She meant to be pleasant, but she saw I was sleepy, and she scolded me because we were all up so late last night. I suppose"—Miss Halliburton's tone grew bitter—"she thought we were up for our own amusement."

Her head drooped wearily.

"I wonder where Josh is!" she sighed.

"Don't give him another thought," I begged her. "Pray go indoors and rest. I'll wait about the garden for him."

"There's a hammock down there," she remarked, with a languid gesture toward the lower end of the garden; and we separated.

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Aside from the night's exertions the morning itself was hot and drowsy enough to dispose me to slumber. Miss Halliburton's sleepy voice acted like an added soporific. Though crime lay behind me, and almost certain "trouble" lay before, I found that hammock in the cool interior of a hemlock thicket and straightway fell asleep.

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I awoke reluctantly when my name was called, but when I saw before me the three Daughters of Desperation, evidently come in a body to advise me of a calamity—for deep distress was depicted on their faces—I was broad awake in an instant and sprang to my feet.

"Have they come?" I demanded.

"Have who come?" asked Miss Halliburton.

"The police, to be sure," said I.

"We don't expect the police. It's about Josh," she returned.

"Oh, *Josh!*" I repeated, immensely relieved,

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though at the same time it saddened me to think that I had to be aroused from my reviving sleep for the sake of that wretched cur. Still, it was high noon, as I saw by the shifted rays of the sun, and the ladies, so wan that morning, had their colour restored by their hours of rest.

"I thought the silver had been missed—or found," I remarked to my accomplices.

"It surely has been found by this time!" cried Miss Dicey, wringing her hands. "We packed up Josh with it!"

"What?"

"We shut down the lid on him! We have shipped him with the silver to Stepново!" cried Miss Houghton.

"The devil!" I exclaimed, involuntarily.

"Yes. Wasn't it fiendish, horrible, cruel carelessness?" sobbed Miss Dicey. "I did it myself. Oh, he'll die! He'll be suffocated! It's too ghastly!"

"But are you sure? I don't see how it could have happened," said I, beginning to doubt the event.

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"It was this way," Miss Halliburton explained, and here was a time when her calmer demeanour shone forth with fine effect. "Miss Dicey had Josh on her lap, sitting in the waggon last night, watching you pack."

"I remember," said I.

"Then came the alarm. She said she put Josh down on top of the ready-packed silver——"

"Didn't you see me do that, Mr. Silsbee?" asked Miss Dicey, eagerly.

"I don't remember," I confessed. "You put out the light."

"Then you both got out of the waggon," Miss Halliburton quietly continued. "Miss Dicey thinks he must have curled up in the hollow made by the punch-bowl (as she describes it, it was large enough), and gone to sleep in the time that we all stood listening. Now, didn't you close down the lid of the chest before you relighted the lantern, Mr. Silsbee?"

"I did," I confessed; "and this frees you from all blame in the matter, Miss Dicey," I added, for her distress was very painful.

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"He was in my care," she returned, inconsolably. "I should have missed him at once. I'll never forgive myself."

"But it's unlikely, anyhow," I protested; "the dog would have yelped and we should have heard him."

"Ah, you know his trustful nature, Mr. Silsbee!" exclaimed Miss Houghton. "Would he have yelped? We think not. We think he quietly slept while we screwed him in and shipped him. But in the baggage-car, on the train, and in the express-office, when he realises that he is betrayed, *it is then that the box marked hardware will send forth howls!*"

I reflected on the circumstances; on Josh's predestined career of making trouble; and I had to admit that the dog was probably in the box.

"Perhaps he passed quietly away for lack of breath," I suggested, hopefully, "ere ever he awoke."

They received the suggestion with every mark of grief and pity, so that I was sorry I had spoken. There was no stemming their

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bitter self-accusation for Josh's death until Miss Dicey remembered the large crack between the two places that made up the cleated lid of the chest. This crack, we decided after much talk, ran right across the place of the punch-bowl, and should afford Josh his necessary air. The conclusion did not, of course, tend to make us easy. If Josh was safe, we ourselves were in the greater danger. As Miss Houghton had said, the box marked "hardware" would send forth howls. Who could doubt, in that case, but it would be opened, the silver discovered.

"And Stepново arrested!" said Miss Halliburton, with tragic quiet.

"Stepново?" said I. "How about us?"

"The box was directed to Stepново. They'll go for him."

"But the silver was marked with Miss Bushnell's name, wasn't it?" said I. "Won't they search these premises for all traces of the thieves? Won't Josh be recognised as the dog who made himself conspicuous at the wedding by his attachment to Miss Halliburton?"

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"They will come to the Bushnells, of course. Josh will be recognised as our dog, too," said Miss Halliburton, calmly. "But nobody would suspect *us* of the hideous cruelty of packing up a small dog in a chest full of silver. The circumstances will tend to lead suspicion away from us."

"You are a little too easily reassured," I protested, warmly. "I tell you that to the detectives who are perhaps at this very moment looking over the scene of the burglary over yonder, our trail across the lawn and through the hedge and to your stable will be as plain as if we had trod in fresh-fallen snow. Ladies, the hour has come when we must face the consequences of what we did last night."

But I made very little impression on them. They could not, when it came to the point, conceive of the possibility of themselves being arrested. They thought it more likely that nothing would be done in Keswick till the police had secured the man to whom the box had been directed. The question with them was

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not one of their own safety at all, but that of their accomplice in town.

"But he is in your apartment, you say," I still urged. "Won't that bring the guilt directly home to you?"

"Yes, it will in time," said Miss Dicey. "But I've heard again and again how slow and stupid detectives are. A good many of my best friends in the city have had dealings with them. I think we had better consider what we can do to warn Stepново first and afterward consider ourselves."

"Somebody must go there," said Miss Halliburton. "He does not answer the door-bell, so it is no use to telegraph. He is simply on the look-out for the express-waggon that is to bring the silver."

I promptly declared that I would go, resolving to make myself as useful as possible, even in the hour of our ruin.

It was an hour before the next train left for the city, and when Miss Halliburton learned that she decided that I must have luncheon. I was not in the least hungry; but when I found

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that Miss Dicey, the real hostess of the premises, was too much perturbed to attend to me, and that Miss Houghton was absorbed in encouraging her and consoling her—when, in short, it appeared that Miss Halliburton herself had to attend to my wants—I confessed to some appetite. I followed her to the house. The big, cool dining-room was pleasantly shaded by faded old yellow silk curtains at the windows. I stood there watching her as she walked about fetching me bread and cheese and salad and cold meat, and I took the plates from her hands to set them on the table. I cannot say that she attended to my wants with the pretty solicitude that Miss Dicey had shown in my prison, yet her manner was distinctly more gracious toward me than it had been the night before. She really seemed anxious to fortify me for the journey. She spoke regretfully of the heat I would find in the cars; she seemed anxious that my tea should be strong enough. Then she sat opposite me, silent and pensive, her eyes on the floor. The strange, golden light through the

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shades made a glory on her hair. I had the opportunity to look at her face and wonder.

The hour was too short. All too soon Miss Houghton and Miss Dicey came in nervously to warn me that it was time for me to depart. Miss Dicey gave me the address of the apartment and the keys that should admit me.

"You must go in softly," she warned me. "If Stepnovo sees you before you see him he is likely to jump on you."

Miss Halliburton smiled faintly and swept me with a look from head to foot.

"I think Mr. Silsbee will probably hold his own," she observed, quietly.

They all shook hands with me, urgently recommending now Josh, now Stepnovo, to my care. I promised to telegraph them at the earliest possible moment.

"I shall see you again," I said to my chief.

"Oh, of course," she returned, in a cool, little voice; but a delicate pink rose to her face, and I was content to look away.

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I had really more than time enough to make my train. As the day was hot I walked very slowly to the station. There, just as I was about to step into the waiting-room, I saw, by the tail of my eye, a little dog who slipped nimbly round the nearest corner. He looked so much like Josh that I gave immediate chase; for to be assured the dog was not packed up with the silver was enough to make this very disagreeable journey into town unnecessary.

The dog turned out to be Josh's brother; not that he looked so much like him when I finally caught up with him; but I knew the blood by the fatal touch he had upon my affairs. In following him back into the street and across it I lost about thirty seconds more than I counted on, and I dashed back to the platform to see my train move out. My mortification may be imagined.

There was nothing for it but to take the local train, which left fifteen minutes later and took nearly three times as long to reach the city. The manly thing for me, I suppose, would have been to go back to the Daugh-

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ters of Desperation and confess my failure; but I dared not. I meekly endured the penance of the local, and spent a weary, hot, and anxious afternoon.

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THE sunset lights had flitted to the highest buildings before I found the house on West ——th Street, the address given me by the ladies in Keswick. There was a general atmosphere of being closed up and gone away for the summer about the whole block. It was perhaps as quiet a place as Stepnovo could have found in the city for his business of smelting stolen silver.

I used my pass-key and entered a dim and quiet lower hall. Avoiding the elevator for fear of being challenged I sneaked upstairs in unhappy trepidation, and was glad to reach the door with the cards of my fellow-burglars. Swiftly and noiselessly I used my second key and let myself into the apartment.

Both on the ground of personal safety and because of curiosity, I desired to take Stepnovo entirely by surprise. He was to have no

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time to jump on me. I meant to do all the jumping. Further than that, I meant to take a good look at the man before he became aware of me.

The passage was rather dark, lighted only by transoms over the closed doors on either side of the hall. At hazard I tried the first door to the right and thereby entered the kitchen. It seemed to be in good order, though it had evidently been lately in use. I saw no signs of crucibles and furnaces, however, and Stepnovo was not there.

From the kitchen, through a dark pantry, I entered the dining-room. Here were the remains of a modest luncheon upon the table; a few leaves of lettuce, crumbs of brown bread, and a wine-glass that had contained claret. Still, there was no sign of the man himself.

Through an open door I peered cautiously into the next room; it was large, its width being the width of the house, and pleasant with the light of several windows, and attractive by the home-like and unconventional charm of its furnishing. Still, I saw no Step-

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novo, and was about to withdraw to search the chambers on the left side of the hall when I caught sight of a partially curtained alcove in which stood a couch.

There lay a figure stretched in sleep.

Noiselessly I advanced, gently I drew aside the curtains to get a light on his face, and then I stood transfixed in consternation.

Stepnovo was a girl!

A wonderfully pretty girl it was, moreover! She lay in the lovely relaxation of deep sleep. Her dark, glossy hair showed black against the yellow silk cushions of the couch, and an unreal and delicate light played on her features. She was exquisitely dressed, and had unfastened her collar in lying down, so that her round white throat was bare.

I stood for a long while regarding her, moonstruck in admiration. There was not the glimmering of an idea in my head as to what I had to do next. Still she slept, her breath coming light and soft as a little child's.

I decided that, danger or none, I could not be so rude as to waken her, and resolved to

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step back into the dining-room and wait till she awoke of her own accord.

I resolved it, I say; yet minute by minute slipped by, and I still prolonged my fascinating watch. I had never before noted the awful beauty of sleep nor felt its mystery. While my gaze, as by hypnotism, was fastened to her lids, I speculated on the lustre of those eyes so close behind that delicate veil of flesh. They were unseeing now, their soul in dreamland; yet the next flash of time might bring them back, those lids might be raised, and I be transfixed.

Evening was falling. Slowly the light on the sleeper's face grew more dim. To lose not a line of it I bent farther over. I held the curtain back as far as I might.

Suddenly I was grabbed from behind, gripped about the neck, and almost choked.

The real Stepново at last!

With the output of all my strength I hipped my unseen assailant, and he, surprised into losing his first advantageous hold on me, went down. I was on top of him, but I found him

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pretty game. If this was Stepново he was rather more spirited than prudent in going for me so desperately. How did he know but that I was the Chief of Police come for him in person.

It was no wrestling, it was a free fight. We were each bent on pommelling the other, and the girl sat up and wailed. But I was the heavier man; in about thirty-five seconds I had proved superior science. I had my man fairly down and was punching him thoroughly, when suddenly the gas, lit by the girl, flashed a light on his face, and I gazed down upon the still recognisable features of my old friend, Fred Spoffard!

He knew me at the same instant, and we both arose. For a long moment we were engaged with our handkerchiefs. The lady was making no end of a fuss over Fred's little bruises; I betook myself quietly to the kitchen sink and managed alone. Then I went back to the front room.

"Well, old man, we made a mistake, I guess," said Fred, ruefully. "I'm awfully

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sorry, you know. I didn't know you, of course."

I was relieved to find him in the mood to apologise; it seemed to let me out.

"It's rather an unfortunate meeting," I said. "But won't you present me?"

"Ina, this is Silsbee—our best man, my dear, who had the snake-bite," explained Spofard, genially. "Maurice—my wife."

She looked at me as if I were no end of a monster. I was very unhappy.

"Why did you fight?" she cried. "What happened?"

"It was my fault, dear," said Fred, humbly. "You see, after you went to sleep I got confoundedly thirsty, and I thought I'd just step out and have a drink; and I suppose I left the door open (eh, Maurice?) and you walked in."

I nodded basely. I seemed to be hurled along by the hand of fate, and only asked myself dazedly, "Is Josh in this?"

"And so when I came hurrying back—I wasn't gone five minutes, Ina—" (the

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scamp! I had been there a half-hour myself) —“I found him in the room, and it was rather dark, and I naturally tackled him. I thought he was Stepnovo.”

Mrs. Spoffard looked far from satisfied.

“Men are always shielding each other,” she said, sternly. “Has this fight nothing to do with the snake-bite medicine?”

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, aware now what had been the nature of Miss Halliburton’s sufficient excuse for my non-appearance at the wedding.

“How heartless you are, Ina!” cried her husband. “See how you have wounded Maurice. Do you think he is the kind of man who would show himself before he had slept it off?”

“Are you sure it was a rattlesnake?” she asked me, still suspicious.

“It was a venomous serpent!” I cried, thinking of Miss Halliburton — wondering whether I could ever forgive her.

“Come, come,” urged Fred, peaceably. “Let’s drop that question altogether. We were

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awfully sorry, old man, not to have you at the launching, but you see we got afloat all right. And, I say, it's just like you to make a point of looking us up as soon as you got on your legs. Some fellows would have had a sort of false shame about the whole affair, you know. Now you're here to explain yourself, aren't you? Let's sit down here in the cool of the window and have a good talk. I'll just turn down this gas; there's no reason why we should get any hotter. Here's a good chair, Ina. Maurice, here's one for you! Oh, I'm all right in the window-seat here."

I sank into the chair with a sense of that awful calm that precedes the last crash of doom. How many minutes was it given to me to live a reputable and sane man in the eyes of my old friend and his lovely bride?

Mrs. Spoffard seemed filled with good-natured regret for the black mistrust with which she had first greeted me. Fred having made light of his injuries, she bestowed on me her full forgiveness. I breathed deeply at the respite. Not till morning would she know the

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blackness of her husband's eye, and then I would be far away.

She took occasion to speak to me graciously about the wedding-gift I had sent her, and which I had stolen from her again that morning before dawn.

My mental anguish was accentuated by a profound uneasiness in regard to my mission, unfulfilled. I had yet to warn Stepnovo that Josh was in the box, and had probably betrayed it; that this flat where the box was addressed was certainly the first place upon which the officers of the law would descend.

And my accomplices, waiting in Keswick for my reassuring telegram! What was their state of mind by now?

"Ina, do you think your friends would object if we smoked here?" inquired Fred of his wife.

"Dear me, no," she returned, promptly. "Stepnovo smokes every minute of his life."

"So you are visiting friends here by the quaint and charming name of Stepnovo?" I

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asked, in a rather strained voice, so great was my effort to make it casual.

"You'd almost think he was the master of the house the way he makes himself at home here," said Mrs. Spoffard, in a tone of displeasure. "But to answer your question, Mr. Silsbee; no, this flat is occupied by friends of mine, and Stepново is an acquaintance of theirs who seems to be living here in their absence."

"But you say yourself, Ina, you think he probably has permission to be here," put in Fred. "He is not like us, Maurice, breaking in secretly, and making ourselves at home."

"Are you doing that?" I cried, and I admired the whirligig of time which so soon was bringing its revenges.

"You see I lived here last winter, Mr. Silsbee, with my friends, and feel very much at home in this flat," explained the lady; "and I still had my keys which they forgot to take away from me when they turned me out. So Fred and I came here for a lark to-day, just

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to pretend we're housekeeping, instead of going to the hotel till our steamer sails."

"I see! But doesn't the presence of this Stepnovo——"

"Well, he isn't here now. But he has been here to-day. In fact, he was lunching in the dining-room and suddenly disappeared; whether he departed by a window, when he heard us coming, or whether he hid somewhere in the apartment, I don't know."

"And are you not afraid of this rather suspicious character?" I demanded, with surprise.

"Oh, dear, no, he's a perfectly harmless lunatic," said Mrs. Spoffard, carelessly. "My friends, who befriend him, call him a prophet; but you would have to know them to weigh their judgment. I know Stepnovo very well; he was here nearly every evening all last winter. Of course I would not be afraid of him."

"But I tell you I didn't like the idea of that fellow having a key and sneaking in and out whenever he liked," said Fred. "You can't tell about these Russian Nihilists——"

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"He's not a Russian Nihilist," said Mrs. Spoffard, laughing.

"What is he?" I asked.

"Well, if I knew, I suppose I am sworn not to tell," she returned. "I took so many vows of secrecy last winter I can't remember them all. But I told the girls their secrets were safe with me; they bored me so I couldn't remember them to tell any one. But I do remember enough to feel sure Stepnovo is as harmless as a lamb."

"Well, I wasn't going to let him off from a licking, on general principles, when I took Maurice for him," muttered Fred.

"But now, Mr. Silsbee," she said, turning suddenly to the attack I had reason to dread, "we want your story. In the first place, how did you know where to find us?"

"Think a moment," I suggested, and in my desperation I adopted a light tone of raillery. "To how many people did you intrust the profound secret of your plans?"

"Only to my mother, I declare," said she.

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"Then from whom else," I asked, triumphantly, "could I have got it?"

"Oh, you have been in Keswick!" they both exclaimed.

"Yes," I replied, weakly, "I've been there all day. Mrs. Bushnell is very well."

"Had she any special message for me?" asked the daughter.

"She had!" I cried, catching at a straw. I saw a way out of my fearful predicament, and now I pretended to search my pockets. I blessed the darkness that they could not see my face.

"Where in thunder did I put that note?" I muttered, perfectly conscious that I was over-acting my part, yet in my extreme agitation unable to get myself in hand. "Great Scott! I've left it at the hotel; however, it's only a few steps!"

"Hold on, don't go now!" cried Fred, as I hastily rose.

"Yes, sit down. There's no hurry at all," chimed in Mrs. Spoffard, graciously.

"Yes, it's very important I should go," I

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stammered, bound to get away at any cost. "You just wait quietly here till I come back, will you?"

It was a good deal to ask, since I meant never to come back. However, they promised, and I left them.

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NOW I was free and intent on putting several hundred miles between myself and these unsuspecting friends of mine; but first I meant to do my duty by Stepnovo. I would assure myself he was veritably not in the flat before I left it to make my own escape.

First I carefully closed all the doors between the front room and the rear of the apartment that the Spoffards might not hear me walking about. Then with a box of taper matches I made my search.

I saw some strange things. In one narrow room was a grand piano, and the bed had been drawn by pulleys to the ceiling. Evidently at night it rested on the closed piano. In another room the walls were lined with books, and the bed was not so wide as a fore-castle berth. A desk was at one end of the room, and at the other the gas-fixtured, so that the green, serpen-

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tine tube of the drop-light pervaded the room in an ominous, ensnaring kind of way. A third room was hung with an art student's studies. Altogether, these glimpses I had of the cells of the sisterhood were not very cheering.

But Stepново I found nowhere; and, with my last match extinguished, I was creeping down the passage to the door, when I heard low voices outside. I stopped in consternation.

The door was opened, and against the lighted stairway without, I recognised, not the officers of the law whom I expected, but the figures of three young women whom I knew—the Daughters of Desperation!

"Make no noise!" I warned them, in a hoarse whisper.

They did not start. Softly they entered and closed the door, and on tip-toe we all repaired to the kitchen. There one of the ladies made a light.

We four confronted each other under the flaring gas-jet. Their faces were wan and

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weary. They had evidently spent a hard afternoon.

"Why did you come?" I asked, sadly. My tone was low, and Miss Dicey spoke softly in answering me.

"To see what is the matter. You didn't telegraph."

They all looked reproach, and Miss Halliburton added, with a light break in her voice:

"We did not know but you were caught!"

Was this girl with tender grey eyes and lips softly parted the same who had the day before had the inhumanity to send my friend a telegram that would make me for ever ridiculous? I forgot the perilous situation as I faced Miss Halliburton. Words in which I might upbraid her rose to my lips; but already the questions were pouring in on me.

"Where is Stepnovo?" "Have you seen him?" "How long have you been here?" "All the afternoon, haven't you?" "Couldn't you have found time to telegraph us?"

"Ladies, ladies, have mercy on a mere man like myself!" I begged, morosely. "Believe

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me, I've not been taking my ease. But the whole problem is very much complicated for me. Fred Spoffard, my very dear friend, and his wife are——”

“Brrrr—wang!” went a bell. We all started. Miss Halliburton sprang to a tube in the wall.

“What is it?” she said. A man's voice answered. She turned to us with wide eyes.

“It's the *box!*” she whispered, tremulously. And then to the tube again. “Yes, this is the place,” she said. “Bring it right up!” and she jiggled a button in the wall that opened the street door.

I felt all strength ooze out of me, and leaning against the laundry-tubs I at last, and for good and all, gave myself over into the hands of my malignant fate.

Soon we heard slow steps on the outer stairs. Miss Halliburton went out into the passage and lit the gas, then opened the door to admit the men. Miss Houghton and Miss Dicey seemed as overcome as myself. They had sat down clinging together on one chair, in a

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corner of the kitchen. I, for my part, watched the pantry door; for it was by that that I expected every instant to see one of the Spoffards enter. Surely they would have heard the bell and answered it.

But if they heard it at all they had no intention of being disturbed. So much for the alertness of honeymooners! If I go at all far into this business of burglary, I will do all my easy apprentice work on newly married people.

Two men staggered in with the chest. I stepped forward to settle with them. Miss Halliburton was for doing it. Between us the two expressmen were handsomely tipped and went away quiet and grinning. I think they would have been sorry to see us get into trouble.

And now the box stood in the middle of the floor and we around it; or rather, I stood up, with the screw-driver that had been thrust into my reluctant hand, while my companions knelt about the box, listening, calling softly, anxiously whistling to the dog within.

With one last furtive look at the pantry



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“The Daughters of Desperation waited heartlessly.”



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door, I began to take out the screws. The Daughters of Desperation waited breathlessly. Once when I glanced at Miss Halliburton's face I noted that her brow was contracted and her tears flowing freely. I knew now that these tears, in any other woman a signal of pitiful distress, were in her nothing more than an expression of excitement or of angry impatience. I reflected bitterly on my wretched weakness in succumbing to those tears the night before.

The last screw was out; we all rose to our feet. Miss Dicey held ready a moistened cracker with which to revive the famishing Josh, should we find a spark of life in his little body. With a sense of solemnity we paused and looked at each other for a moment. Then I raised the lid.

Josh wasn't there! The silver punch-bowl offered the hollow where he might have lain; but Miss Dicey's theory was exploded.

"He must be there!" she cried, excitedly, and she threw off the excelsior and cotton that covered some of the larger pieces of silver.

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At this moment the door of the pantry opened and Mrs. Spoffard appeared on the threshold. She stood transfixed with surprise on seeing us all, and the Daughters of Desperation were equally thunderstruck at her appearance. So we all stood a moment in silence, and then, as our eyes fell guiltily from her to the floor, we were aware of a small dog who trotted into the kitchen before her. In one voice we cried out:—

“Josh!”

“Yes, Josh,” said Mrs. Spoffard, with a laugh. “The chief entertainment of our wedding has followed Fred and me on our honeymoon. Aren’t you glad to see him, girls?”

Glad to see him? They dropped upon their knees about the creature and nearly tore him limb from limb in their eagerness to caress him. Miss Houghton laughed hysterically, Miss Dicey showered pet names upon him and reproaches that it was well her excitement made partly incoherent. Miss Halliburton, always more quiet than the others, seemed

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none the less anxious to handle the dog, as if to assure herself she was not dreaming. As for me, I would not have touched my little hoodoo with a toe of my boot. I looked at Mrs. Spoffard; she returned my look and laughed.

I had dropped the lid of the chest and knelt on it. Now, at her easy laugh it seemed to me she could not have noticed the silver; yet it had been fully exposed to her view when she entered. Had she not recognised it as her own?

"How did you get him, Ina?" inquired Miss Halliburton, above the commotion of the other two.

"At Hopperville station this morning early," she returned.

"He followed the waggon!" cried Miss Dicey.

"We had been up to the Lake House for the night," continued the bride, "and we came down to take the 8.47 train to the city. We drove out to Hopperville to take it, so that we should not be seen in Keswick again. And

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there was your priceless treasure hanging about the station, and the ticket-agent, who hates dogs, was throwing stones at him. As I already had the plan, girls, of trespassing in the dear old flat, it occurred to me to bring Josh along as a peace-offering; so that when I wrote you my confession of what I had done I could sugar the letter with the news that I had left Josh safe with the janitor."

"And if you'll count the silver,"—came Fred's voice, and he appeared beside his wife. Myself and my accomplices started violently, "Don't be frightened; it is only I, the very not at his sudden appearance but at his words. least among you yesterday, and even less to-day," he said, humourously, as he greeted his wife's bridesmaids. "I say, if you count the silver you'll find none missing. We are no ordinary housebreakers, and we have scrupulously respected your property, except in the line of tea and sugar and water-biscuits."

"And we washed up the afternoon teacups and put everything away," added Mrs. Spoffard. "What you'll find in the dining-room is

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Stepnovo's luncheon. He seems to have been interrupted in the midst of it. He seems to have been making himself at home here. In spite of all the windows open I knew he had been here by the odour of his tobacco. I think, girls, if you let that man come and go as he likes, you ought to be ready to excuse the liberty of an old comrade like me."

There was an embarrassing pause. Mrs. Spoffard evidently expected some cordial reply from the ladies of the house, and she rather flushed and looked a little haughty when it did not come. Indeed, one might have taken for a sullen displeasure the despair that was written on the faces of the Misses Houghton, Dicey, and Halliburton. They stood up straight and pale now, and had at last forgotten Josh and remembered themselves. Between them and their former comrade stood the box of silver they had stolen from her. And this box Mrs. Spoffard ignored with mysterious calm. They said no word. There were a few furtive glances at me and at the chest, and then their eyes returned to Mrs.

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Spoffard's face with the fascination of horror.

"Of course I had not the remotest idea you girls meant to come here to-night, or, in fact, this week," said Mrs. Spoffard, with rather a pretty affectation of heartiness meant to conceal her mortification. "Now we must hurry and get out of your way. Fred, where are my things?"

They both withdrew to the front room. We heard their rather animated though lowered voices. Evidently they shared the mortification and were discussing the situation.

"Oh, haven't we been abominably rude!" exclaimed Miss Dicey, aghast. "I didn't know burglary would bring this in its train."

"But she is going," whispered Miss Houghton. "She didn't see the silver. We are saved!"

"But where is Stepново?" I asked, just by way of keeping our perplexities well in the foreground.

"I think," said Miss Halliburton, "that Powell and Gardiner must have been here and

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warned him. They've all fled. They've no idea we got the silver."

"Then we have the whole glory!" whispered Miss Houghton.

"But we can't smelt it," said Miss Dicey.

"Mr. Silsbee can and will," declared Miss Halliburton.

"Oh, will I?" said I.

"Won't you?" she asked, and her brow gathered. I saw the menace and had an access of desperation.

"If you cry, now, you sphinx, I'll tell you what I'll do," I threatened her, in a savage whisper (I don't excuse my behaviour, but I must say my patience had been strained). "I'll report the whole gang of us at the police station within five minutes!"

She gave a low exclamation of rage and fright. The two others turned on me like furious little cats.

"What did you say to our sister?" demanded Miss Dicey, with fire-flashing eyes, and Miss Houghton transfixed me with a coldly glittering stare of enmity.

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"Ladies, we have pulled together amiably till this extremity," I said, with bitter reproach. "Is this the moment to quarrel?"

"There is no quarrel," said Miss Halliburton, with sudden, icy self-control. "There was simply an insult!"

"An *insult*?" I protested, hotly.

"You called me a minx. That means a forward, saucy girl," she said, with trembling voice. "It is not the language I should expect from a gentleman."

"Madam, I called you a sphinx!" I cried.

"Hush-sh-hsh!" went the other two. Then Miss Dicey pronounced rapid judgment.

"If he said sphinx, it's no insult, because you know you are one, my dear. And Mr. Silsbee is incapable of disrespect. We do wrong to be so peppery."

"Will he smelt the silver or will he not—that is all I care to know?" said Miss Halliburton, addressing the opposite wall of the kitchen.

"He will," I said to the faucets over the sink.

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"Oh, as to this box of my silver," said Mrs. Spoffard, suddenly coming back into the kitchen. We stood aghast. As she approached the chest we fell away from it in guilty silence. She seemed not to notice us, but lifted the lid and calmly surveyed the contents.

"What in thunder is all this?" exclaimed Fred, coming in at that moment. His honest amazement wonderfully relieved us. We had been all but hypnotised by Mrs. Spoffard's mysterious composure.

"It's my wedding silver, Fred," returned his wife, shaking her head with a sigh as she still gazed down into the chest; *"isn't it just exactly like mamma to send it after us like this?"*

We burglars looked at each other.

"So that's what you came about, Maurice, is it?" Fred asked me.

"Yes," I confessed. "I came here about the silver."

The Daughters of Desperation drew closer together as if for mutual protection. I stood

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up alone, unprotected, save by my poor, frozen smile of innocent unconcern.

"Here is another thing for which we must beg your pardon, girls," said the bride to her maids, with rather a pathetic little air of formality. "This is making ourselves rather too much at home, isn't it, to have our things brought here to lumber up your kitchen? You see, it was this way: mamma didn't want the silver left in the house at Keswick. She was afraid it would be stolen. But Fred and I insisted, because we knew the safe in our basement is absolutely burglar-proof."

"There is no such thing," put in Miss Haliburton, "as a burglar-proof safe. Gardiner could get into anything!"

"Yes," I added, hastily, "the famous Gardiner, you know, Mrs. Spoffard, is at present loose. He escaped from the penitentiary the other day."

"That's so," said Fred. "I remember seeing it Saturday morning."

"Perhaps mamma read about it after she agreed to leave the silver," suggested Mrs.

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Spoffard. "And that is the reason she sent it here in such haste. This is the only address she could have reached us at before we sail."

She directed the remark to me interrogatively. I responded with a dumb nod. At my defection the Daughters of Desperation gave little gasps.

"It's awfully good of you to bother with it, Mr. Silsbee," said the bride, gratefully.

"And say, Maurice," said the groom, "since we sail so early to-morrow I wonder if you won't just finish up the job and get this stored?"

"I expected to have to see it through," I returned, with calm.

"Well, we'll give you the proper papers, and you can have the stuff chucked away into the safety-vaults of the bank, will you, Maurice?"

"Anything you like," I returned, and my cheerfulness was not feigned. A great and beautiful hope had dawned within me. The Daughters simply stood and dumbly wrung their hands.

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"Mrs. Spoffard, there is some more of your silver left in the safe at Keswick," said I. "I packed most of it, but not all."

"Good gracious, why not?" she asked, in a disappointed tone.

"Well, this chest wouldn't have held any more," suggested Fred.

"I wish it could all have been kept together," sighed Mrs. Spoffard. "Now, unless I unpack, I won't know what's in town and what's in Keswick."

"Suppose you give a signed order to get the rest of the silver from your mother's house," said I. "Then I'll put it all together in the bank for you."

"Oh, but this is such a lot of trouble for you," she objected.

"Since I was unable to serve Fred as best man, I owe you a service," I returned, with a glance at Miss Halliburton; she responded not at all. I took my note-book out and fountain-pen and wrote the following order:

"Please give Mr. Maurice Silsbee the combination to our safe and let him take all the

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silver out. He will deposit it in the bank for me."

"Will you sign this, Mrs. Spoffard?" I asked her.

"What's the use of being so formal?" she demurred. "Mamma didn't bother about any order for what you have taken out already."

"No, but it is for the very reason that the last deal was so irregular that I am particularly anxious to have this done in good form."

"Sign it, Ina! Maurice knows," advised Fred; and he looked over her shoulder as she wrote. "Don't forget to put on the Spoffard," he murmured, anxiously.

"And now I'll just close this chest again," I remarked, cheerfully, as I picked up the screw-driver.

"By the way," asked Mrs. Spoffard, as she handed me the order, "why did you open it here?"

"I thought there had been a mistake in packing it," I stammered. "This—ah—punch-bowl, I thought, ought to have been filled out."

"Yes, it should have," came softly from one

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of the ladies of the house. I was not sure who spoke.

"Why, it's all right," said Fred, scattering excelsior over the whole. "A great, solid thing like that wouldn't bend."

"Just as you say," I replied, as I dropped the lid. "The silver is yours, not ours."

A triple sigh went up from the Daughters of Desperation.

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Filled as I was with joy and gratitude over the kindly turn in my affairs, I was still alive to the feelings of my late associates. Though I had saved them, along with myself, from all the consequences of their mad act, yet I knew that at this moment, before they had brought their strong, rational powers to bear on the subject, they saw in me the cause of the whole failure. It was impossible to leave them without coming to some terms of peace. I felt the need of establishing some basis on which I might hope to see them again.

"Let us have dinner, all together," I pro-

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posed, cheerfully, to Mrs. Spoffard, as I put in the screws of the box. "I can get some food and drink served up here on very short notice, if you will preside."

"I should be very glad to have dinner all together," she responded, readily, "but I am not the hostess here. Girls, will you all go to the hotel with us?"

"Indeed, you must all stay and dine with us!" exclaimed Miss Dicey, with an anxiety that showed she was conscious her hospitality came late. "Please do, everybody. I'll send right out for dinner."

"Please let me go out and order it!" I begged. "I have some specially nice, cool things in mind. You must be too fatigued with your journey to give it a thought."

"By all means let Mr. Silsbee manage everything," came Miss Halliburton's cold and level voice. "That seems to be his special talent."

Words will not describe the contained bitterness of her tone. I met her glance, in which there was a bright, uncompromising hos-

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tility. As for me, my thoughts reverted to her snake-bite story, and my heart was hardened against her.

"Miss Halliburton understands me," I said, in an amiable tone. "I am never so happy as when I am managing things—*successfully!*"

The taunt struck deeply home. Her brow gathered, her head fell back in that attitude of pain, and her dark eyes overflowed. She turned hastily away and left the room. I was lamed with compunction. I cared not a whit now for the feast of reconciliation. When Fred Spoffard proposed that he himself was the man to go forth in search of food for us I promptly assented, eager only to find the lady I had offended and try to make my peace with her.

She stood at a window in the front room, looking fixedly out into the lighted street, clearly battling for calm. It was my moment. I knew if she could but once succeed in turning on me icily and with level voice I should be cowed. With the courage of extremity I

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stepped to her side and addressed her with strong feeling.

"Miss Halliburton, it is an exquisite torment to me to see you shed tears."

She gasped at my boldness, but it had served its turn. Her excitement was far beyond her command now, and she almost sobbed her reply:

"You taunt me—with the failure—but I did everything as well as it could have been done. If it hadn't been for you—and your dog——"

Josh was at her feet, fawning about the hem of her dress. I picked him up and set him on the window-sill between us.

"I will not speak of myself," I said, "but had it not been for Josh, your humble adorer, Miss Halliburton, you would at this moment have been in the unlovely peril of arrest. As things have turned out, you are still free and respected."

"Respected!" she repeated, bitterly. "I shall be scorned and reproached by all those who looked toward the use of the silver for the furthering of our colonisation plans!"

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"If your anarchist friends are too stupid to appreciate your brilliant and intrepid leadership in last night's affair they are unworthy of you," said I. "Even I, who have little reason to feel friendly toward you, Miss Halliburton, cannot withhold my reluctant admiration."

She looked quickly toward me. The light from the streets was bright enough in her face for me to see the troubled surprise. But she did not speak, and I remained silent. Josh sat before us, looking alertly from one to the other. Her hand stole out to stroke him.

"It's too bad," she said at last, in a somewhat new voice, "that you should feel unfriendly toward the new owner of your former pet."

"Haven't I a long list of injuries?" I said, gloomily. "From the first moment of our meeting, Miss Halliburton, you have treated me as I hope and trust you will never treat my dog. First you took me for a burglar; then by your order I was bound and imprisoned and starved and poisoned. Then, with your own



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hand, you led me into crime. And throughout the adventure you have snubbed me so markedly—ignored my feelings so persistently—that I shall retire from your presence to-night a crushed and disheartened man!”

“Your accusation is as unjust as it is long,” she answered me, quietly, and I regretted to see that all signs of perturbation had passed from her. “When I saw you first I took you for the great genius, Gardiner. That was surely a compliment. Then I handled you as a dangerous opponent—another compliment. When I was in need of chivalrous service I complimented you again by selecting you to perform it. Afterward—I took you to drive.”

I could have sworn a smile flitted over her face here, but it must have been the light; she continued with perfect gravity:

“In short, for two days you have been the guest of the society of which I am Regent. You see I have treated you with marked distinction and cordiality.”

I was about to bring up the little matter of

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the snake-bite, but she continued, with a fall in her voice to gentleness:

"I snubbed you only once, and then it was necessary. I could not let you think for a moment of emigrating with us."

"And I could think of nothing else!" I exclaimed.

I laid my hand on Josh, and finding her fingers under mine I clasped them. Then I bent over the little dog and looked into her face and poured out some foolish words—foolish in that they were so inadequate to what I felt.

Tears rained down her face, but she was smiling through them.

"You are unreasonable in your requests," she sighed. "How could you join us? You can't become a Daughter of Desperation."

"But a son-in-law," I urged.

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They were setting the table in the next room. There were lights and gay words and

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laughter. Josh began to think we ought to join the others. When we had stood awhile in one posture he roused us by a querulous barking.

THE END.





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